

Season Three
Episode Ten: Distant Voices
By Kittsbud

Unknown Location

The darkness didn't hinder the hands – instead, nimble fingers moved swiftly, making light work of their task. A husky voice joined the fingers' movements, chanting some bizarre incantation in an unknown tongue.

To the unperceptive mind, the language could easily have been mistaken for Latin. Except, this was no dialect any church would ever adopt.

The mantra was dark, evil, *foreboding* as the narrator sprinkled nameless dried herbs over a strangely fashioned amulet.

The amulet seemed to be in the shape of a humanoid, but its outlandish body parts suggested this was no ordinary figurine. The creature it depicted was a mysterious mixture of both animal and human limbs – a thing of malice – a bringer of death.

The chanter paused, taking a vial and pouring its dark red contents over the amulet.

The droplets of blood splattered across the metal, adorning the statuette's grotesque features with its garish color. As the coagulating liquid began to run down the metal, the chant began again, becoming faster and faster until the words were almost unintelligible.

The voice became frenzied, its owner nearly gasping for breath as it sought to finish the unholy summoning. Just as the cadence became almost falsetto, the blood on the amulet began to hiss, tiny wisps of steam erupting from its surface as if the metal had suddenly become super-heated.

In a flash of white light, the blood and herbs ignited, the abrupt discharge of heat burning away their very existence to leave behind something far more sinister...

Anza-Borrego Desert State Park
Joe Bearwalker's RV

Joe Bearwalker dropped down from the rear step of his RV and stretched. It was late afternoon, and the sun's waning position in the sky was making him feel like taking a nap.

The Tlingit shaman often worked night gigs, and the previous evening had been no exception. So far, he'd managed a little over two hours sleep in the space of two days, and it was beginning to tell even on his well-honed body.

Had Joe been alone, he'd probably have been buck naked sprawled inside his Winnebago by now, with a bottle of Moonshine tightly clasped in his hand. Hell, he'd earned it on his last hunt.

As it was, there would be no drinking, and no carefree slumber.

The Native hunter turned and looked out across the rocky butte, enjoying this one last guilty pleasure before returning to his job as custodian and all round protector of Mia Cameron.

A golden eagle soared high in the sky, diving on some unknown prey among the spattering of red barrel cacti that encroached the sand around his RV.

To Joe, the sight made him feel at one with nature and he inhaled, feeling like he was actually flying with the graceful bird as it spread its wings, gliding just above ground level over the mesa.

The eagle, like Joe, was a hunter, a predator that shouldn't be caged.

And yet I am caged, while ever I have to play nursemaid to the girl, Joe's mind chided him, even though the shaman didn't really regret taking in Mia to help his old time friends, the Winchesters.

As hunters, they'd been through a lot together – although he still figured they owed him big time for the way Laura Mitchell had trashed his 1950 Indian on a gig back in Big Bear.

Dean is so gonna pay for that one day, Joe chuckled to himself as he turned back to the RV, catching a glimpse of his restored bike as he reached out to step back inside his mobile abode.

The bike was his "baby," a red, two-wheeled stallion that meant as much to the shaman as the Impala did to Dean.

Joe grinned with pride as the chrome-work shimmered in the twilight afterglow, but then, he paused, taking a second glance at the motorcycle.

The bike was sitting innocently on its stand and yet it seemed to be rocking – moving as if some ill-timed wind had whipped up out of the ground – a wind that was swelling outwards like the desert sand had taken on a life of its own.

Joe's brow furrowed with a newfound concern and he abruptly discarded the idea of going inside. This was something that needed his attention – something unnatural – something wrong in Mother Nature's womb.

As a tribal shaman, Bearwalker had seen and sensed many things, but this, even for him, was frightening. He could feel the energy building, and his intuition told him to run like hell.

Nevertheless, Joe felt a hand instinctively reach for the .44 Magnum tucked into his waistband. He drew the weapon, eyes darting back to the open RV door.

"Mia! Mia *run!*" The shaman's voice was filled with dread, but he didn't try to retreat. If this thing was coming for the girl, then it would have to go through him first.

The sand ignored his yells, it ignored the weapon now pointed at the strange, growing epicenter it was creating.

And it changed, morphing, coalescing into a shape.

A shape Joe Bearwalker had seen before in ancient texts depicting some of the most dangerous demons known to man.

The form didn't take note of Joe's awe, or his fear, but instead continued to materialize from the desert like some bizarre sculpture made from the sand. As it grew, long taloned feet appeared along with a hideous tail that took on the shape of a scorpion's sting.

Finally, a head emerged from the human-like torso, popping from between the brawny shoulders like a balloon being filled with air. The head was akin to a human-dog hybrid the likes Joe had only seen in *Dark Angel* re-runs, and for a second he felt a playful smirk cross his features.

Except, this was not Joshua, and it would have none of his innocent, puppyish traits.

Once fully formed, the demon's eyes sprung open, locking on the hunter as a dry smile crossed its canine countenance, drawing its features into a more human expression of pleasure. Its head cocked, but it didn't speak, nor did Joe expect it to.

This was Pazuzu, king of the wind demons, bearer of storms, droughts – and ultimately – death.

Pazuzu wasn't here in the desert by chance. He wasn't here to talk about the niceties of sleeping out under the Anza-Borrego sky and cooking on an open camp fire.

Joe aimed the Magnum and pulled back on the trigger not once, but six times in rapid succession until every chamber was empty. He knew the bullets would do little to the thing, except maybe piss it off, but even that might distract it long enough for the girl to escape.

The ruse seemed to work, and Pazuzu's tail flicked like that of a rattler as he whirled on the hunter, sand churning as the wind from earlier returned, whipping at the sides of the RV like a typhoon had engulfed it.

"Mia!" Joe screamed the girl's name again, but there was no movement from inside the RV. Had she dozed so deeply as not to hear him? "Mia!"

Joe's features contorted in agony as Pazuzu engulfed him, whipping at his body with millions of tiny sand pellets until the shaman felt like he was being flayed.

But then, maybe he was.

Pazuzu's strange form spun faster and faster until Joe crumpled to his knees, but he couldn't fall forward – the thing was holding him upright for the kill.

Joe wanted to scream again, this time not for Mia, but to any Tlingit deity that might be listening. But today, even his Gods abandoned him.

Blood oozed through raw patches of flesh, and in his last conscious moments, all the hunter could think of was the girl – why hadn't she heeded his warning? How could the Winchesters ever forgive him for failing her, and ultimately, them?

Impala

Four Days Later...

Dean felt every bump of the rough Arizona back road as it tousled the steering wheel in his grip. He didn't want to be here. Hell, he didn't want to be within a hundred miles of Mia, and yet here they were in a car together, neither one knowing what to say to the other.

Mia was no doubt blaming herself for Joe Bearwalker's horrific injuries, and Dean guessed in a way she was right. The Native hunter had undeniably put himself in harm's way to protect her.

But then, that was what hunters pretty much gave their lives up for – saving people – hunting things. It had been their kind's mantra since the dawn of time, and Dean doubted it would ever change.

The good news was the "hunter's doctrine" at least hadn't gotten Bearwalker killed. The shaman would be out of action for awhile and have a bucket load of new scars to brag about, but he was going to be okay.

The bad news was he was in no shape to be Mia's bodyguard for weeks, and that left her right back in the hands of the Winchesters. Whichever way Dean looked at it, the girl was being pushed from one dangerous circle to another.

And damned if I can do jack about it. Dean was tempted to slap the Impala's wheel in frustration, but then he realized it wasn't fair to take his annoyance out on a piece of metal that didn't know any better.

"You know, you really didn't have to pick me up," Mia sighed. "There's nothing you can do but watch my sorry butt, and look what that got Joe."

Dean smirked and shook his head, thinking of how inappropriate his last thought had been. "Oh sweetheart, there's *nothing* I'd like better than to watch your sorry butt."

"That's *not* what you said back in Texas..."

The sentence was short – clipped – but it was easily apparent to Dean what Mia was digging at. He'd left her behind once even though he had feelings for her; she wasn't so naive as to think he wouldn't do it again.

"Look, Mia." Dean took a breath, trying to find the right words, the right justification, but in the end, he realized he didn't have either. "I left you with Joe because of what I do. What I *hunt* could get you killed."

Mia crossed her arms and looked out the window. When Dean didn't offer any more excuses, she shot Sam an apologetic glance and reached for the stereo, flipping through several tracks on the CD player until she found Iron Maiden's *Only The Good Die Young*.

Dean's eyes strayed to her and a spark of mirth flashed across his hazel orbs. Even when she was pissed at him, she still managed to know how to push all the right buttons. He reached out a hand, turning up the volume even further until Sam grabbed the fur pelt that covered the back seat and tried to muffle out the sound from the speakers with it.

Dean was tempted to chuckle, but then the tupilaq hide he'd brought back from Canada abruptly reminded him of Joe again, and he remembered just why the shaman had been hurt. *He'd left Mia with Joe. He'd asked Joe to look after her.*

It wasn't Mia's fault Bearwalker was now lying in a hospital bed, it was Dean Winchester's.

"Dean, I think you should turn down the music." Sam leaned over the bench seat, his body bouncing as they hit a patch of craters in the road.

"Suck it up, *SuperSammy*." Dean glanced back to his brother, the corners of his mouth ticking just enough to say he wasn't in a good mood, and that meant someone would probably pay with a full-on dose of snark.

Sam sat back, crossing his arms and looking to the roof lining for Divine vehicular intervention. "Fine, Dean, but when the car explodes don't expect me to be the one to walk to the nearest gas station."

"Huh?" Dean's brow furrowed and he finally saw his brother's point. Hastily switching off the stereo, his face contorted in mental agony at the grating sound coming from beneath the Chevy.

"Maybe something got caught on the chassis?" Sam offered.

Mia shook her head, her mechanical knowledge far outweighing Sam's. "That's coming from the transmission. Maybe we should pull over?" She asked, head cocking sideways as she looked expectantly at Dean.

Dean scowled. He knew every inch of the car, every tiny scratch, every nut and bolt – and his baby couldn't be having trouble with the auto box – it was inconceivable. "It's not the transmission." He kept his foot on the gas, only easing off slightly as the noise grew louder.

"Dean, will you stop being an ass and face the fact that this car is older than you are? She's bound to get a few aches and pains in her old age!" Mia lifted a hand, threatening to swat Dean, but then retreated when she saw he wasn't playing.

"Even if I pull over, there's nothing we can do out here in the middle of nowhere." Dean's eyebrows sank into a huge frown and he hunched forward in the driver's seat enough to admit with his actions – if not his words – that the Chevy was in serious trouble.

Since being smashed into a tree, and later through a brick wall, he'd probably pampered the car way too much, but it was all he had left to cling to apart from Sam, and maybe now Mia.

"Sammy, is there a town nearby, or maybe a gas station?" *Friggin' women trouble, car trouble, can I get more jinxed? I swear some sucker hid a hex bag on me!*

Sam pulled out his cell and began to scroll through all the options that allowed him to access Sat Nav. Flicking through two or three screens he paused on the last and began to pull a face that said it wasn't good news.

"The nearest place is called Cibola, but it's tiny. Only one hundred and seventy-two residents. It's not much more than a ghost town, *literally*."

"Well then you two should *fit right in*." Mia smirked, slapping Dean on the back so hard he *knew* she was trying to irk him. They were just too much alike for her not to be. People said opposites attracted, but that so wasn't true about their relationship.

Love/hate was a much better description – and that was on a good day.

Dean looked over his shoulder to Sam who sat scowling right back at him.

Apparently, little brothers were very uncomfortable when their siblings had a girl in the car. In fact, Sam seemed very uncomfortable around Mia at all of late. *Maybe she reminds him what it was like with Jess?*

Dean shrugged off the thought. Whatever was bothering Sam, he'd get over it. "Dude, are you gonna tell me how to get to this place or do I gotta send me out a scout?"

Mia groaned and turned the stereo back on, masking the now irritating sound of metal on metal from the Impala. "Just *don't* look at me. I've already been dumped in the middle of nowhere by you two bozos once..."

Cibola, Arizona

When Sam had said Cibola was small, he hadn't been kidding. There was no real "town" to speak of, just a few scattered houses among the desert landscape that looked like they'd been buried and forgotten since the west had been won.

Dean suspected if they dug around enough, there actually would be some real western ghosts in the place, ready for their next gunfight at high noon.

Of course, right now, Dean didn't exactly care if Wyatt Earp, Billy the Kid or Wild Bill were out ganking on each other, he just wanted the Impala to stop sounding like it was going to explode. Each gear change was accompanied by a loud metallic scream followed by a lurching motion as the car struggled to make shift changes.

To Dean, it was bordering on psychological torture akin to that dispensed by Haris.

"Look, why don't we ask that kid if there's a garage or something here?" Sam gestured out the window to a teenager. The kid was kicking a ball aimlessly along a track obviously considered by locals to be a road.

"Dude, I doubt if these people have *electricity*," Dean griped, tapping the brakes just enough so the Chevy was matching the speed of the kid's gait. He rolled down the window. "Hey, you folks have a gas station or garage around here?"

The kid turned and shrugged with such a vacant look Dean was convinced he wasn't going to get an answer. But, after a second's more thought, the teen pointed off the dirt road towards a farmhouse. "Mr. Pruitt knows cars. Fixed my dad's truck up real good last summer when he shot out a light shootin' at Robby McCallister..."

Dean grimaced, nodding knowingly as the kid returned to the ball he seemed so obsessed with. "Shot out his *own* truck's lights? Real smart folks around these parts..."

A vision of *Deliverance* seemed to stick in his mind, right along with the classic *Dueling Banjos*, but he turned the car towards the farm anyway. If Pruitt could stop the Chevy screaming like a banshee, Dean didn't care how weird he might be.

"Nice kid," Mia laughed. "Wouldn't you just love to meet his pa?"

"Not unless I was armed first." Sam shook his head and watched Pruitt's home grow closer until it filled the Impala's windshield.

As they drew to a stop, the Chevy seemed to shiver and something underneath finally gave way. Dean closed his eyes, unsurprised when the column shift wouldn't slide into park and he was forced to shut off the engine while the car was still in gear.

"I think maybe we need to salt and burn the bones," Mia teased, sliding out the passenger side before Dean could growl a response.

Dean followed her lead, looking up to the main house as a stout figure in overalls emerged.

The actual farm didn't appear half as grimy as the hunter had expected. The windows had been recently cleaned, and the paintwork appeared to be fresh for the season.

Hank Pruitt, on the other hand, was exactly what Dean had expected.

Pruitt looked to be in his late forties, with a fresh growth of stubble the hunter swore had egg in it from the guy's breakfast. His face, like the overalls he wore, had smears of black oil and grease daubed all over it. And yet, his smile was enough to bring warmth to the coldest of hearts.

Dean instantly liked the man.

Pruitt was a whacked out version of Bobby Singer and Cooter from the *Dukes of Hazzard* all rolled into one.

"Excuse me, sir, but someone back in Cibola said you fixed cars?" Sam had climbed from the rear of the Chevy and taken it upon himself to get things moving.

Dean turned, nodding back at the Impala. "I think my transmission is totaled," he explained, feeling like he was giving the car its Last Rites. "Funny thing is, I never noticed a thing until we were about twenty miles out."

Hank took off his soiled baseball cap and ran a hand through his equally soiled hair. "Well, these classics can be that way. They're great while the going's good, but just like any woman you provoke too much, they sometimes bite ya right on back when you're not lookin'."

"Can you do the work?" Sam asked, fingering his cell phone in anticipation that the farmer would say no.

Hank rubbed a hand across his nose and sniffed. "Sure thing, used to work for a Chevy dealership back in Tucson in my younger days. 'Course, I'll have to take a look at her and order in some parts. She ain't likely to be ready for a few days."

Mia ran her tongue across her teeth and to Dean it looked like she was already annoyed. Maybe she thought she could fix the car better than Pruitt. Hell, Dean thought maybe he could too, but if Hank could get the parts in, three sets of hands were likely to be way faster than one.

"I don't suppose there's anything like a motel in this place, either, right?" Mia eventually asked, running a hand over her brow to mop away beads of sweat.

"Hell, no, ma'am, never been a need for one." Hank winked. "People usually want to leave Cibola, not stay," he chuckled, then realized what the girl was asking. "You folks can stay on in the house here with me if you like. I don't bite. 'Course, Billy my dog might..."

Mia turned to shoot the hunter a look that said "no way," but Dean was already walking closer to Pruitt with a satisfied smile on his face. "We'd really appreciate that, thanks."

"My pleasure. Any man who drives a car like this deserves a little respect. Young people today, too fussy buying Japanese imports to notice what they're missing." Hank cocked his head and squinted at Sam, appraising him. "Son," he continued the lop-sided stare. "Now you look like the kinda guy who drives a Honda..."

Dean raised a brow, wondering just how Pruitt had pegged him for a geek so quickly. He shrugged his shoulders when Sam blinked, apparently speechless. "My name's Dean Blackmore and this is my brother Sam," he glanced at Mia, uncertain how to introduce her. "This is Mia...a, uh...friend along for the road trip we're on."

Hank narrowed his eyes again until his left was almost closed. He rubbed at his chin, eyeing Mia appreciatively. "*Friend*, huh? Yeah, I can see how that would be." He jerked a thumb to a shack at the side of the farm. "So, you two wanna help me haul the lady into the barn?"

Mia started, then stepped aside when she realized Pruitt was actually talking about the Impala.

Pruitt noticed her flinch and smiled again before heading for the Chevy's open driver's door. Dropping inside, he took a hold of the wheel and then craned his neck back out with a scowl. "Hey, you folks gonna start pushing sometime today? 'Cause, hell, I'm sure too old to put my back into it with you young pups around..."

Sam shook his head and peeled off his jacket, tossing it on the rear seat before joining Dean and Mia at the Chevy's trunk. "Can you believe this guy?" He asked through clenched teeth.

Dean shirked his head to one side. "Aww, c'mon, he's just a little eccentric. I like the dude." He placed his palms on the car's metalwork and began to heave, noting Mia was doing much the same at his side.

"Eccentric?" Mia countered. "He's whacked, Dean. Tell me you're not really planning on taking him up on his offer to stay here?" She bobbed a head towards the

farmhouse and shivered. “That place creeps me out! This is way too much like that whole deal in *House of Wax* with the freaky mechanic...”

Dean beamed, pushing harder as the Impala slid through two large and slightly rotten barn doors. “Just don’t go take a leak in there and you’ll be fine,” he teased, noting the abundance of tools carefully placed and ordered inside the makeshift workshop.

Mia let go of the car and straightened up, brushing her hair back away from her face. “Yeah, well just remember, the girl lived in that movie, most of the guys weren’t so lucky.” She looked over her shoulder. “Right, Sam?”

Sam wiped the grime off his hands on a towel he’d retrieved from the trunk and winced. “I err...never actually saw that movie...”

Pruitt clambered from the Impala and scratched at his neck, lingering at a spot behind his right ear. His expression suggested his brain was probably on another planet – lost there after a bad “trip” in the sixties – but eventually, he glanced at Sam, patting him on the back as if they’d known each other for years.

“Sonny, that was one *bad* flick.” Hank pulled something from his pocket that looked suspiciously like chewing tobacco. “I think I’m gonna like you after all,” he warbled stuffing a wad in his mouth and grinning like someone out of a *National Lampoon’s* movie.

Hank Pruitt’s Home Some Time Later...

The inside of Hank Pruitt’s home fascinated Sam. How such a shabby man could keep such a clean house was beyond him. Every item had a place, just like in the mechanic’s garage, and every place was spotlessly clean and unscrupulously tidy.

The dining table was the focal point of a small kitchen, with the oven, refrigerator and work surfaces lining a wall with a small window at its center. The other side of the kitchen was filled with a huge cabinet that had probably been around in Civil War days.

It was the cabinet that mesmerized Sam.

The cabinet had two huge glass-fronted doors that invited all to peruse its unusual and aging contents.

“Dean, you should come look at this.” Sam laid a hand on the glass while turning to glance at his brother.

Dean had been seated at the table with Mia since they’d been shepherded out of Hank’s workshop, and so far all he’d done was sit and quibble with the girl over every conversational topic they’d broached – including whether or not their new host was a mass serial killer.

So far, Mia was for the idea that Hank had a huge axe hidden somewhere ready to decapitate unsuspecting guests, while Dean continued to insist the man was just a humble mechanic.

“Dean, Hank has some really unusual stuff here.” Sam tapped a forefinger on the cabinet. “It’s like his own personal museum.”

Mia scoffed. “Yeah, well as long as we don’t end up as his next set of exhibits!”

“Oh for crying out *loud!*” Dean huffed back, pushing back off his chair to visit the sink for a glass of water. “He’s not a psycho, trust me, I’ve seen enough of that type.”

Sam shook his head and decided to return his attention to the cabinet. Dean and women was always a touchy subject, but Dean and Mia was like striking a match near a gas leak – sooner or later there was going to be a huge explosion – and Sam wasn’t sure he wanted to be around to evade the falling debris.

It wasn’t that he disliked Mia, but he disliked what Dean became around her. There was just something wrong about it all.

Something wrong about her, Sam's inner voice screamed as he eyed faded monochrome photographs. *I mean, c'mon, the Impala never breaks down, and suddenly the transmission blows right after we pick her up..?*

Sam edged sideways, viewing more pictures from the thirties, forties and fifties. Some of the ancient images he recognized as aviators from a time long gone. Famous pilots who had set records, crossed oceans, and in some cases, even saved lives.

The hunter closed his eyes, trying to allow Hank's collection to invade his mind and push away all the negative thoughts he was having. Dean would say he was just jealous.

Dean wouldn't listen, even if Sam tried to explain that he sensed something, something "off" about their current situation.

About the circumstances surrounding Mia's sudden return.

"You like my little stash of goodies there, Sonny?"

Sam's eyelids snapped open and he turned to see Hank looking at him with a slightly crooked smile. The mechanic appeared to have cleaned up somewhat, although he still had the odd patch of oil on his face that he'd apparently missed with the soap.

"It's pretty...unusual," Sam nodded, pointing to an old leather flying helmet and goggles that had been tagged as "Amy Johnson's." "Where did you get all this? If you don't mind me asking?"

Pruitt's smile broadened and he thumped Sam on the back again so hard the hunter thought he was going to crash into the cabinet. "Hell, no, 'course I don't mind! This was my pa's collection. Damn near lived his life for flyin' and collecting this here memorabilia."

Sam shot a glance over Hank's shoulder to where Dean and Mia's flirting was bordering on violent. Any minute now, he expected Hank's somewhat odd tea set to go flying across the kitchen.

Sam opened his mouth to intervene, and then thought better of it, refocusing on the mechanic. "I recognize some of the photos, but not the one on the end." He tapped at the glass, indicating a picture that's edges had curled and discolored to a dirty brown with age.

The image depicted a woman in uniform with short, curly dark hair, but there was no tag.

Hank pursed his lips as if the history of the picture actually pained him. He looked down, shuffling on the woolen rug at his feet before answering in a dourer voice than Sam thought the man could ever possess.

"Her name was Gertrude Tompkins Silver. She was a WASP back in the forties – ya know, women who used to fly Mustangs across country ready to deliver to the war effort in Europe. She vanished without a trace back in '44 and no one ever found her."

"An unsung hero," Sam noted, looking at the picture with saddened eyes and a new kind of respect.

Hank scratched at his head again, this time the motion looking odd without the greasy baseball cap that normally resided there. "Yeah, Pa thought so too. Mind you, Gertrude got him in a bunch of hot water. See, back in '44 Dad always swore he saw a plane flying low over the desert the night after Gertrude disappeared. Everyone thought he was crazy as a coyote that'd been chowing on peyote. The authorities were convinced Gertrude's Mustang crashed into the sea shortly after takeoff and wouldn't hear any other theories."

"What do you think?" Sam asked, real interest making him want to know what had happened to the young woman.

"I dunno," Hank stuffed in a wad of tobacco and started to noisily chew. "But one thing I do know? Nobody deserves not to be found like that. I mean, they can't rest."

He wiped flecks of tobacco off his fingers down the front of his semi-clean shirt and then reached out, opening the cabinet.

Reaching inside with stubby fingers, Hank pulled out a small pair of wings and offered them up to Sam.

Without asking why, Sam felt compelled to take the gift. He didn't know Hank, nor could he ever know Gertrude, and yet he felt a bond between them, between not only the mechanic and the long-dead aviator, but also a bond with them and himself.

It was a disorientating revelation – one he couldn't hope to understand – and yet, Sam didn't fear it.

Embracing the feeling, Sam let his long fingers graze over the wings, sensing the cool metal, tracing the outline of their shape. Eventually, he took them into his own palm, staring at the insignia as if the pin could show him the missing aviator's fate.

"Funny, ain't it?" Hank swallowed, taking down a segment of tobacco unintentionally. "But those things always seem to feel strange – like they got a life and soul of their own sometimes."

Sam raised both brows, surprised at how quickly he agreed with the mechanic's appraisal.

There was something here in Cibola.

Something Sam wasn't sure was good.

Gently clasping the wings in his hand, Sam nodded to Pruitt in an unspoken understanding. Stepping away from the cabinet, he purposefully strode over to the dining table, knowing what he had to do next wasn't going to be easy.

Sam had to get Dean's attention away from Mia and back in the game.

"Dean."

Sam watched as his brother continued to bicker with the girl, his ears apparently deaf to everything but her voice.

"Dean! Will you just *cut it out* a second and listen!" Sam heard his own normally placid voice's pitch tick up an octave in anger. "I think there might be something weird in this place."

Dean and Mia both turned, but it was the girl who bothered to respond.

Mia shot a glance to Hank, not caring if he saw her or heard what she said next. "The only thing *weird* about this town is where you two clowns picked to hole up for the night!"

Sam hesitated, torn between respect for his brother and the wariness he'd felt every time he'd talked to Mia just lately – since she'd come back from Joe's place, in fact.

Impala shouldn't just burn out a transmission. Joe shouldn't just get his butt kicked by a demon. Girls shouldn't keep getting possessed over and over...

Dean shouldn't be so trusting.

"Well maybe it's not *Hank* I'm worried about," Sam spat out the sentence and instantly regretted it. He had no reason to suddenly distrust Mia.

And yet he did.

Maybe it's this creepy Weirdsville freaking me out. Maybe I'm overreacting...

"Me?" Mia pushed back from the table and kicked away from her chair. Her pupils narrowed and she looked over to Dean as if he should suddenly be defending her. "You've known my story all along. You know I can't help what happened to me and now you're giving me this crap?" She took a second longer to let her gaze shift between the brothers and then stormed out into yard, hissing expletives under her breath as she slammed the screen door behind her.

Once Mia was out of earshot, Dean pushed out of his chair and simply stared at his brother for the longest second. "Sam, what *the hell* were you thinking? Mia didn't ask for us to pick her up, and she sure as hell didn't want to be stuck in this freakin' cow town with us." The hunter's mouth quirked as if he was trying to control his temper and failing miserably.

“Are you *blind*, Dean? Every time we’re around her something bad happens. You keep that car in perfect shape all this time and now the transmission blows? She’s a *mechanic*, Dean, she could easily have rigged it. Or maybe you’re thinking with your downstairs brain a little too much to even care anymore?” Sam took down a breath and stepped back, resisting the urge to grab his brother’s collar and shake some sense into him. “And let’s not forget the whole ‘silver’ thing back in Vermont.”

“So because someone makes one stupid mistake you don’t trust them anymore?” Dean’s cheeks began to flush with color, and he stole a glance out of the nearby window. “Is that it, Sammy?”

Sam wanted to say there was more to it than that. He wanted to explain that maybe *he* could sense things Dean couldn’t. But then, Dean would probably turn that right on back and say he was just as big a freak as Mia – and he’d probably be right.

“Just be careful, Dean...”

Sam chewed into his lip, biting back the urge to say much more because he could see his brother was close to exploding. Dean had probably not even realized it, but he’d clenched his fists so tightly his knuckles had turned an unhealthy shade of white.

That was a sign Sam knew all too well meant his brother was about ready to start swinging punches.

Taking a sharp intake of breath, Sam pushed past his brother in silence and began to walk. He didn’t care where, he didn’t care how far, because right now he felt more alone than the day he’d stood over Jess’s grave knowing he’d never see her again.

Sam had lost Dean.

Dean had lost Sam.

And the only difference was, Dean hadn’t even noticed.

* * * *

Sam hadn’t been keeping track of the time as he walked. He never could when he did these “little walkabouts.” All he knew was, he’d been pissed at Dean and needed to get out before they both did something they’d regret later.

At the time, *anywhere* had sounded like a good idea, but in Cibola, anywhere was just about everywhere.

Sam looked up as he trudged along the sandy trail, watching as the last vestiges of sun seeped into the horizon and were gone.

Truth be told, he had no clue where he’d ended up, and the wide open spaces of Arizona tended not to carry too many signposts.

Basically, Sam had to admit to himself he was lost. Lost, with no food, no water, and it was too late to even try and follow his own footprints back to Hank’s place.

Not that he wanted to be there right now. Mia would probably never speak to him again, and Dean would still be pissed. Deep down, Sam wasn’t ready to apologize, because his gut was still screaming that he was right.

Maybe Mia wasn’t bad, he’d admit that, but she was definitely bad luck for the Winchesters, and they had enough of that kind of misfortune on their own.

Sam stuck his hands in his pockets and pulled the jacket closer to his body. As the night took over from day, the desert around him was getting cooler – maybe even cold.

He began to walk faster, hoping the extra exertion would keep his body warm, but it wasn’t going to help when the time came for sleep.

Sam needed shelter, and soon. *Except I walked myself into the desert. Not exactly a whole lot of motels and bars out here, he chided himself. I mean, c’mon, Winchester, it’s not even hot now, so not even the chance of a mirage...*

Sam chuckled, suddenly getting the image of some lap-dancing bar stuck in the middle of the Sonoran desert, complete with ice-cold beers and some very curvaceous women.

“Great,” he spoke to the empty wastelands. “Now I’m starting to think like Dean. I must be losing it.” He wrapped his jacket even tighter around his tall frame, hands pushing deep into his pockets until something sharp dug into his right knuckle.

Sam winced before remembering the set of wings Hank had given him. Coming to a halt, he fumbled until he brought out the offending badge and pin that had stabbed into his flesh.

The wings glistened as the moonlight reflected from the metal. They looked new – certainly not over fifty years old.

Sam looked at them and then shifted his gaze to the heavens – to the stars pilots like Gertrude had easily navigated by.

“If only I was so lucky,” Sam muttered to the night sky, watching as a shooting star flashed across the firmament far out in the harsh void of space. “Guess this will teach me to stop crashing out of arguments with Dean so quickly. First I get Meg and now I get lost.”

Maybe you should carry a compass...

Sam spun around so fast he almost tripped over a small cactus that he’d somehow missed in the darkness. He stumbled, steadying himself before frowning.

There was no one around, and yet he had heard the words like they had been spoken right into his ear.

In fact, when he thought about it, the voice did seem to have come from his own head – but it hadn’t been *his* thought.

“Okay, so now I’m hearing things.” Sam blinked and lifted a boot to move on, but he didn’t actually start to walk. He couldn’t, because there was something ahead of him in the desert he hadn’t seen before.

It was impossible to miss, really, and yet he had.

Tall dark structures made from timber jutted out from the landscape like sentinels watching over the scorched desert. Except these guardians were old – so old – the timber they were built from had long since ceased to be sound.

Sam squinted, forcing his eyes to focus the shapes into something more discernable. They had once been buildings, of that he was sure – perhaps a whole street – or maybe the remnants of a whole ghost town.

A water butt lay on its side, in what the hunter could only imagine had once been the center of the street. And around its rotting carcass, balls of tumbleweed drifted like angels floating above the clouds.

The whole image was surreal, and it brought back memories Sam would rather have remained buried. This was how Dean had described Purgatory after his unwanted visit to the “other side.”

Slightly unnerved, and yet curious, Sam began to walk towards the remains of the long-dead settlement. It was probably the kind of place the “Hellhounds” would deem a den of psychic and spiritual activity, but to a real hunter it was nothing more than a fascinating piece of history.

Just because the place was old, didn’t mean it had a bad history, nor did it mean the place was haunted. *It doesn’t mean it isn’t, either*, Sam’s inner voice warned as he stepped up onto a decaying section of decking.

The wood creaked beneath Sam’s boots but he ignored the noise, concentrating on what he presumed had once been a saloon. The place might hold a wealth of knowledge and history – not to mention it might provide warmth and shelter for the night if he was lucky enough to find an intact stove.

Sam slid a hand under his jacket and pulled out his mini-Maglite. With a quick twist, the tiny beam illuminated the room around him with just enough glow to let him get an idea of what things had really been like here.

It wasn't like something out of a movie. It was bland, practical, and after years of abandonment, it was filthy.

Something moved and Sam zeroed in on it, the glare of white radiance from his flashlight catching in the creature's eyes.

"Rats," the hunter shook his head with a small smile. "Boy, Dean would just love to be here right now." He turned back, focusing on his search for a stove.

Eventually, the Maglite caught the ovoid shape of something metal seated on cast iron legs. As Sam moved the light upwards, he could make out a funnel from it into the roof. He moved closer until the shape formed into the solid lines of an ancient wood burner.

"Now all I need is a couple more miracles and my night is complete."

Sam stuck the flashlight between his teeth and fumbled to unlatch the stove's door. There were cobwebs and what looked like corrosion, but the metal swung away easily to reveal logs that had been cut half a century earlier.

"Okay, so that's miracle number one." Sam frowned, unsure if he liked the odds of being so lucky. "Now if I had Dean's Zippo I'd be all set."

Taking the Maglite back in his hand, he headed for the bar. Maybe there was something there he could use to get the stove going. An old bottle of rot gut and a match perhaps. *Yeah, right, now that really would be a miracle.*

He swung the flashlight over the wooden counter to light up the shelving behind it, but the ledges were empty. Only a mirror remained at their center, the glass cracked from corner to corner by some unknown object.

Sam's reflection seemed to split in two as it bounced back off the glass and he abruptly shivered. Mirrors always reminded him of Bloody Mary. Reminded him how his eyes had bled and why. He moved the Maglite away, quickly redirecting his search to behind the bar's counter.

It was even darker here, hidden in the gloom away from the saloon's broken windows, and as Sam crouched, he realized he would have to actually rummage with his hands as well as the light if he even hoped to find anything in the nooks and crevices left by crumbling wood.

Sticking his left hand behind the rotting shelving, the hunter thought for the briefest of moments that he'd felt something. He moved his fingers, wriggling them further into the gap until something sharp seemed to sink into his hand between thumb and forefinger.

Sam instantly recoiled, instinctively grabbing at his flesh so quickly he dropped the tiny Maglite somewhere in the shadows. He cursed, an odd burning, tingling sensation moving along the hand he had stuck behind the bar.

It wasn't pain exactly, because whatever had happened, his hand had already begun to turn numb.

Sam hunkered down onto his knees, fumbling in the darkness for his flashlight. His good hand wafted through cobwebs and inches of dust, but with no actual beam in sight to guide him, his efforts were futile.

*Moonlight...I need to get outside, use the natural light to take a look at my hand.
Need to get out of the bar...*

Sam didn't know why, but his thoughts seemed to be getting sluggish. Surely he couldn't be that tired, even with the cold?

He forced his knees to haul him back upright, but as he straightened, he lurched, grabbing at a nearby wooden chair for support.

The chair moved with Sam's weight, skidding and finally toppling sideways as the hunter lost his balance. An awkward *thumpf*, followed by a large cloud of dust signaled he had ungracefully hit the timber floorboards not too far from where his flashlight lay hidden by the saloon piano.

Sam licked his lips and blinked, realizing that his whole body suddenly felt paralyzed – in fact, his mind did too. He couldn't think, he couldn't force one coherent thought into his brain.

Sam blinked again, feeling his eyelids close even though he didn't want them to.
This was wrong.
Cibola was wrong...

* * * *

Sam didn't know how long he'd gone without a drink, but from the coarse feeling at the back of his throat it felt like days. He swallowed, but his mouth was so dry even that movement was an effort.

Did I drink too much?

Sam tried to remember his last thought, his last action, but neither involved alcohol. He'd been mad at Dean and he walked out.

Walked smack into the middle of a desert.

Sam shook his head and found that surprisingly the motion didn't hurt. With renewed confidence, he gently lifted an eyelid just a crack to find the sun glaring down on him.

No wonder I'm thirsty.

He opened the other eye and rolled until he was sitting upright. His muscles ached from the position he'd been sprawled in on the sand, but he didn't feel any other injuries.

Blinking, he cleared away the film that had formed over his eyes and then glanced around.

Something was still wrong.

His mind was foggy, thoughts disjointed, but Sam remembered it should be dark. He *should* be in a building.

I was in the saloon. I started to feel strange and...

Sam used his elbow for leverage and forced his lanky frame up until he was standing next to an outcropping of rock. From what he could tell, it was the only thing for miles to mark the open panorama of sand apart from various species of cacti.

He was lost and alone – not in an old ghost town – but in the middle of the Sonoran desert, with no food, water or any kind of supplies.

Sam caught a breath and held it. Maybe he was dreaming. Maybe he had fallen asleep behind the bar. Except, he knew he hadn't.

Spinning on his heels, he turned in a complete circle, frantically searching the horizon for signs of humanity, but there was nothing but the morning heat reflecting off the sand.

"Okay, Dean, *now* tell me the Impala breaking down here was a coincidence?"

Sam spoke to thin air, letting his body loll back dejectedly until he was perched on the rocky projection, one thing certain in his mind.

The Winchesters had been brought to Cibola for a reason. Maybe his first thought that Mia was behind it had been wrong, but still his basic instinct hadn't been off the mark.

Something wanted the Winchesters.

And now, that thing had separated them.

The demon that's after Mia, maybe? Or some random malevolence in the town?

Sam shielded his eyes with the back of his hand, watching as a vulture dived in the distance. It didn't matter who had trapped him here. In fact, short term, it didn't even matter why.

Right now, only one thing mattered to Sam – escape.

But as he looked over the baking desert badlands, he realized he might as well have been transported to Hell itself.

Hank Pruitt's Home

Dean glanced at the breakfast Hank had set out for him and then pushed the plate away into the middle of the table. While he usually had an appetite the size of a woolly mammoth, there were certain occasions that rendered him unable to eat. Now was one of those occasions.

The bacon, eggs and numerous other tempting foodstuffs remained on the platter, glaring at him, daring him not to care about his missing brother and eat anyway.

Dean swallowed, leaving his chair behind to stomp across the room and look out of the tiny dining area's window. He leaned on the sill, watching, waiting for his gangly sibling to come marching back across Hank's driveway.

But Sam wouldn't come back.

Some inner part of the elder Winchester already knew that.

Dean had pushed too far, gotten angry with his brother once too often, and Sam had had enough of it. It had been this way since they were kids, and sometimes it took weeks, months, even years for Sam to come back around.

Stanford had been the proof of that.

Why does this family always end up pushing one another away?

"You not hungry?" Dean turned to see Mia eyeing his cold breakfast, one hand on her hip as if she disapproved of his starvation tactic. "Or maybe you've seen the light of day and finally think Hank is the next Ed Gein?"

Dean shook his head and stalked back to his chair, dropping down hard on the wood until he thought he heard it creak with the strain. "The food's fine. I guess I'm just..."

"Worried about Sam?" Mia finished, sitting on one of the free chairs and stealing a piece of well-done bacon.

"Pretty much," Dean admitted, taking another fleeting look out the window. "I mean, Sasquatch probably spent last night sinking beers or something, but..." He paused, trying to find the right words as he toyed absently with a fork. "But the way our family's luck holds – especially lately..."

"Since I've been around?" Mia dropped the rasher she'd stolen, suddenly as uninterested in the food as the hunter. "Look, I'm not blind. I know I'm not exactly your lucky horseshoe, but I haven't willingly done anything to you guys. I never would..."

Dean nodded, torn between his emotions for the girl and his worry for his brother. "I know." He stood again, grabbing his leather jacket from a hook on the back of the door. "Sam knows that too. He was just venting. Listen, Mia, I have to go find him. Tell Hank I'm borrowing his pickup and I'll be as quick as I can."

Dean...

Dean reached out to the door but stopped mid-motion when he noted the pleading tone in the girl's voice. Mia was a tough nut. She didn't go soft without good reason. Reason like being possessed multiple times.

Or?

"Is there something I should know?"

Mia opened her mouth and closed it again as if she'd changed her mind. She shook her head, cupping her hands in her lap until she looked like a frightened little school kid rather than the ass-kicking mechanic Dean knew and...

Loved...

The hunter moved back into the center of the kitchen, standing over Mia and putting a hand gently on her shoulder. "Mia, whatever it is you're holding back, if it could involve Sammy, you gotta tell me."

"I think it's back, Dean." Mia looked up, her left hand searching out the hunter's until she squeezed his fingers. "The demon, the thing that haunts me – I've seen the signs – I've sensed its presence, even though it can't possess me anymore."

"You're sure?" The inner soldier suddenly snapped to attention and Dean looked to the window – this time, not for Sam – but for the wind creature that had attacked Joe Bearwalker.

Bearwalker had been lucid enough to tell the Winchesters what had caused his injuries, and just how incensed the being had been. If it was around, it could make a full frontal assault at any given moment.

Pazuzu could smash Pruitt's house to the ground with one flick of its wind-inducing scorpion's tail. It could flay the skin from their bones with its tornado-style sandstorms, and there was squat Dean could do to stop it.

And I let Sammy walk out of here, alone, vulnerable...

"I'm sure." Mia let go of his fingers and closed her eyes, her chest heaving as she drank down a deep discontented breath. "Dean, I know I've come across as a total ass since we got here, but...Hank? He more than just gives me the creeps."

"You think Hank is the demon? Aww c'mon, he's just a small town guy." Dean heaved the chair he'd used earlier until it was close to Mia and then perched himself on its edge.

"We arrive here and he just invites us to stay?" Mia looked warily to the door as if the mechanic might enter at any given moment. "Don't you think he took on guests far too easily? We could be a bunch of freaks for all he knows."

Dean's mouth creased into a smile. "Well, sister, we ain't exactly *normal*."

Mia slowly let out the breath she'd taken down, rubbing her forefinger gently against her temple in frustration. "It's him, Dean, it has to be...who else is there?"

And if it is, Dean inwardly admitted, then I've led Sammy here and let him walk right out into a trap last night.

But was it that simple?

If Pazuzu wanted them dead he'd had plenty of time on the road. Demons were rarely specific to one territory. The thing could easily have taken them out before, so why now?

There was just as good a chance that Sam was still fine. He was a hunter – a damn good one – there was no reason to think he'd been hurt, or was even in any danger until there was solid proof.

Mia's been attacked enough times to know, though. I can't just ignore what she's saying in the hope that good ol' Hank is one of the good guys...

"Okay," Dean finally conceded. "We'll check out Hank first, but if he checks out, I'm going after Sammy."

Mia nodded, and to the hunter she still seemed quiet, subdued somehow. He shrugged it off, knowing that what he had to ask of her next was likely to make her even more cowed; and again, that just wasn't like Mia.

Dean reached to his waistband, letting his silver Colt slide into his palm as if it was an extension of his arm. He checked the clip, even though he knew it was full, then looked back down into the girl's innocent gaze.

"Listen, I want you to stay put. I'm gonna go out back and have a word with Hank." He watched her reaction, gauging the size of her pupils' response to see just how freaked he was really making her.

Mia's eyes gave away nothing, but her reaction said enough. "You're not leaving me in this freaky house while you go play twenty questions with that black-eyed sulfur lover!" She jumped to her feet, edging around the kitchen like a boxer ready to lay a punch on her opponent.

"Yes you are," Dean responded as he pulled out a small silver flask from his pocket and unscrewed the lid. "You're going to get your scrawny ass right back on that chair and stay there until I find out just what the hell is going on."

Mia stopped mid-stride, suddenly more annoyed by the hunter's description of her than the apparent danger they were both in. "Scrawny ass?" Her brow shot up in defense. "*Scrawny?*"

Dean smirked and then shrugged his shoulders. "Got your attention didn't it? Now will you just..." He stopped, eyes narrowing as a noise from the front room caught his attention.

Someone had just slammed the front screen door, and given that Dean was convinced Sam wasn't coming back in a hurry, that only left Hank Pruitt.

Dean instantly edged to the side of the door, holy water in one hand, automatic in the other. He bobbed his head to the left, quickly indicating that Mia should hide.

Mia's brow scrunched in annoyance and she hesitated, only ducking into a small pantry when Dean mouthed "haul ass NOW" at her through gritted teeth.

As the cold-room door clicked gently closed, Dean's eyes zeroed in on the doorknob in front of him. He could feel his heart pounding inside his chest, throbbing against his ribcage as he played the waiting game.

Had Hank realized they were on to him?

The marred wooden handle moved – a slow, deliberate motion than made the hunter flinch and take a step back.

Click.

The oak knob turned just enough for the door latch to give and the door swung outwards. Before it came to rest, Dean made his move.

Jumping into the opening, he brought up the flask of holy water, spraying the unsuspecting mechanic with half its contents. As the liquid found its mark, the hunter played his second and final hand.

"Christo, you sonofabitch!"

Sonoran Desert

The heat wasn't the worst of it; no, the worst was the insatiable thirst that was already building in his mouth. Sam had been stuck without a drink before, but he'd never been lost under the baking hot sun until his lips had begun to crack through lack of moisture.

If this was happening after just a few hours, what would it be like after a day? But then, *had* it been hours? Sam wasn't sure anymore. He wasn't sure of anything since he'd found himself here.

The sun, the never-ending dunes, it sometimes felt like he was trapped inside his own mind rather than lost in the wastelands.

Sam rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth and forced his legs to continue their slow gait, even though his muscles ached and he felt like he could curl into a ball and sleep for a week.

Can't stop. Can't sleep. Won't ever wake up...

Out in the desert, Sam was all too aware of the dangers of sunstroke, dehydration, and worse still, the disorientation both brought with them.

Confusion was already seeping in, of that he was sure, but was it caused by physical reasons, or by the thing that had brought him here?

Something is toying with me...wanting me to break down...

Sam reached a short incline, his boots sinking into the sand as he began to clamber up the slope. He pushed his muscles harder until they were screaming at him for respite, but he wouldn't give in to their pleas.

He had to stay focused – he had to stay angry – at Dean, at anyone, as long as it kept him motivated.

At the top of the bank, Sam paused, squeezing his eyes closed and gulping down warm air that seemed to burn into his lungs as he inhaled.

If Dean was here he'd make some smartass remark about me panting like a puppy.

Eventually, the hunter's breathing evened out and his dry eyes fluttered back open. He'd hoped for some sign of life at the top of the sandbank, some view that gave him hope, but there was only more desert.

Sam felt the pit of his stomach lurch and contort at the prospect of yet more aimless walking – more trudging through sand until the coarse particles cut into the soles of his feet.

And for what?

I have to keep going. Dean will find me. Dean always finds me.

And usually, that was true. Except this time, Sam didn't even know how far away from his brother he'd been transported, or how. Just because he thought this was the Sonoran desert, that didn't mean it was. Was he even in the same state as Dean anymore?

Sam pushed away the thought and looked back out across the blistering mesa. He used his hand to shield the harsh sunlight from his eyes, tediously scanning across the landscape one section at a time until something finally caught his attention.

Something in the distance was glinting, reflecting the sun's rays back like a mirror – except Sam doubted Alice and her looking glass were out in the Sonora.

Sam squeezed his eyes until they were mere slits, forcing them to refocus on the object on the horizon, but the glare was still too much to decipher its origins.

Metal maybe...it glints like the Impala's polished paintwork on a sunny day.

Sam dropped his hand back to his side and decided to take a calculated risk. Running in the intense heat of the day would undoubtedly sap his strength quickly, and if he didn't get water soon he'd probably collapse, but he suddenly had to know what the thing was he was looking at.

Picking up the pace, the young hunter began to jog across the barren slopes, carefully picking his way between cacti and the odd burrow of some desert creature. One wrong footfall out here could mean a twisted ankle or worse, and there was no one to help him walk if that happened.

As he dodged around nature's strange obstacle course, Sam kept his eyes locked on the shining monolith until he could finally see more of it protruding from a huge drift of sand.

The thing was metal, like he'd guessed, but it was still impossible to make out what it had once been. There appeared to be panels fastened onto some kind of frame, but so much of its bulk had long since been buried by the drifting sand that little remained on the surface.

Forgetting his own predicament, Sam felt himself being drawn in by the metallic mystery. It was like the alien thing was calling to him, compelling him to unearth its secret.

"Water, maybe there's water inside." Sam tried to convince himself he had a valid reason for expending so much valuable energy on the thing, but in truth, he was mesmerized by it.

He began to dig, slowly at first, brushing away the loose sand from the riveted edges until he could see a small insignia painted on the metal. The emblem meant nothing to the hunter, and he began to dig faster, sweat droplets falling from his brow and being absorbed by the heat before they had chance to seep into the sand.

As his hands ate away at the desert, Sam finally realized his battle was an impossible one. Whatever the object was, it was far too large to dig free from its sandy grave. He sighed, his body loosely dropping back to rest against the hot metal in defeat.

What was so special about this thing anyway?

Sam swallowed and realized the action was getting harder and harder. He let his tongue run along cracked, salty lips and he wondered if people had died here.

Was this a vehicle that had been lost to the Sonora? A plane maybe?

Was he going to die here along with this metal skeleton?

Dropping to his knees, he shuffled back to where he'd found the insignia on the framework. It was abruptly familiar – abruptly recognizable as a USAF marking he'd seen in Hank's cabinet.

"Maybe your pa wasn't so crazy after all, Hank," Sam mouthed the sentence as he rubbed away more sand under the motif. Eventually, black lettering appeared that he was able to read as "669."

This wasn't just any piece of metal. Just any vehicle lost in the sands of time and space.

This was Gertrude Tompkins Silver's Mustang, and Sam had finally found its resting place.

Sitting back on what Sam now realized was the remnants of a wing, the hunter shut his eyes and let his hand drift back to the badge in his pocket. It was still cold, still eerily familiar.

Something traced down the center of his spine like someone rubbing an ice cube along its length, and for a second Sam was reminded of the saying "someone just walked over my grave." His eyes snapped open as a flash of garbled radio chatter suddenly echoed across the expanse of the desert – and then was gone.

I imagined it.

Letting the heat get to me.

Knew I shouldn't have run, not without water, not without water.

And then, the other voice was back, soft but reproving. The voice that was in his head, but wasn't his. *Should have brought a compass. Pilot's best friend...*

Sam's body jerked and he scuffled backwards, wanting, needing to put as much distance between himself and the silver Mustang that had been here for over sixty years. It was like the thing was taunting him - like someone or at least something – was manipulating him.

It's the demon that's after Mia. It's messing with my head. Am I even in a desert, or is this some crazy mind game? Some weird play inside my own subconscious based on recent memories?

Sam rubbed at an ache that had begun to plague his neck and decided it didn't matter. If this was real, then he had a real urgent need to find provisions. If this was an illusion, then it didn't matter if he wasted time looking for food either, did it?

But what happened to Gertrude?

The question shouldn't have mattered – at least, not until Sam's own predicament had been resolved – and yet it did. Was there a bony skeleton carcass just waiting to be discovered under the surface of the sand?

Sam swallowed and looked at the airframe sticking from the ground. In his mind, he tried to picture the shape of the fighter as he recalled it from school history books. If he was thinking straight, the small motif wasn't far from the cockpit.

Dropping back to his knees, Sam began to scoop away more sand, gently probing until his fingers finally met Plexiglas. Brushing away the desert, his fingers found a crack in the surface he was touching, and he began to work faster until the entire canopy was clear.

Sam took a moment to collect himself and then peered in through the break in the glass he'd found.

There was no body.

No evidence Gertrude had ever flown this doomed craft save for a leather flying helmet and mask sitting innocently on what remained of the pilot's seat. The hide had become cracked and desiccated by age and the sun's heat, but Sam could still imagine the female aviator wearing it, just as he'd seen her in the photos.

If Gertrude didn't die in the crash, then what happened to her?

Sam fell back against the waiting sand dune behind him as reality hit home.

Gertrude had probably succumbed to the desert, just as he soon would. It wasn't exactly rocket science. It was inevitable.

Sam smiled, the smile becoming a grin, the grin becoming a loud chuckle until he couldn't stop and the desert resounded with his laughter.

The heat was getting to him, it had to be, because somewhere in his mind he could hear music that crackled over the airwaves like it had been lost in the ether for decades.

Music that still had the familiar hiss as the needle flowed over vinyl rather than the clarity of a modern day CD.

Eventually, Sam managed to stifle his unwanted mirth as the music dissipated, and he returned to the plane in search of supplies. Probing around the cockpit until he found the exterior release lever, he somehow managed to haul the canopy away enough to bob inside.

As his face hit the fetid air within he squirmed, uncomfortable with the rank, musty odor that greeted his nostrils. The plane might not smell of death in the human sense, but it still oozed the stench as if the timber and metal it had been built from had caused a thousand fatalities during its construction.

In all his years as a hunter, Sam had never felt such a powerful sensation – like a portent of what was to come. He felt the hairs on his exposed arms begin to tingle and it was all he could do not to recoil from the cockpit and begin running as far away from the Mustang as his legs would carry him.

“Just my mind playing tricks, or maybe the thing messing with my mind playing tricks,” Sam comforted himself, busily looking around the inside of the aircraft rather than allowing time for more morose thoughts.

The interior of the Mustang was smaller than he’d imagined, and as he scoured its meager controls, Sam realized he probably would have had a hard time fitting in the plane as a pilot. He slid a hand into the area beneath the seat, hoping there might be a flare gun or survival kit stashed there.

Instead of feeling anything metallic, however, Sam’s fingers met something soft and almost alluring. Taking a hold of the item, Sam pulled it free, his eyes widening as he realized he’d found a journal not unlike his father’s.

The book was leather bound, with Gertrude’s initials embossed in the right corner in silver. Unlike the Mustang, the diary looked brand new.

Sam ran his fingertips over the supple leather, comparing the almost electric prickle it evoked to the feel of Gertrude’s wings. He didn’t know why, but every time he touched something belonging to the aviator, he felt strange – like for just one frozen moment in time he wasn’t even on the same plane of existence as everyone else – but then, considering where he was standing, maybe he wasn’t.

Pulling his huge frame back through the cracked cockpit, Sam shielded his eyes and took a careful glance at the position of the sun in the sky. If he wasn’t very much mistaken, it was already afternoon. Could time have passed so quickly?

Taking another look at the buried plane and the likely fate of its pilot, Sam decided to take a risk and wait to continue his journey. He could use the upturned fuselage of the Mustang for a little cover during the remaining daylight hours, and then travel in the cooler night temperatures.

While he waited for sundown, he flicked open the journal he’d discovered and began leafing through the pages. Mostly the book was full of flight plans and other information that meant nothing to the modern day hunter.

But then, further at the back, Sam found entries that both unsettled and yet intrigued him.

Gertrude had lived through the crash landing in the desert and for days had been making notes in the journal. The entries stopped after just over a week, but there was nothing to suggest why. In his head, Sam had already figured out the reason, but he refused to accept that was his fate too.

Starting back at the first log, Sam couldn’t help but read the events that had transpired sixty years previous.

Oct 27th 1944

I was lucky not to hit rocks last night when I came down. I can see an outcropping in the distance that would have torn my bird to pieces if we’d struck it. The landing gear is torn to shreds anyway though, so even if I hadn’t lost oil pressure there would be no hope of taking off again.

I should be thankful I'm in one piece, but with only a little water and one chocolate bar I won't get very far unless a search plane sees me from the air. The radio seems to be working, but I'm unable to make contact with anyone.

Just one night in this place and I already feel so alone. I never realized before that being in a desert must be the nearest thing to being on another planet. There's nothing as far as the eye can see. No way to contact anyone.

My bird's compass was smashed when I brought her down too, and last night there was too much cloud cover to try and use the stars to pinpoint my position. Perhaps tonight I will fare better.

Until then, I have given my time to gathering the local Saguaro cacti as there is water at their centers I can drink, and their red pulpy fruit are likely the only sustenance I will get until I am found.

If I am found...

Sam re-read the last line, feeling the same desperation that the pilot had. Was he sitting on the same sand dune that she had as she'd written these tragic words?

But she didn't have Dean looking for her! The idea was optimistic, just like Sam always tried to be, but it was flawed as the other half of his subconscious was quick to point out. *No, Gertrude didn't have Dean searching for her, she had the USAF, and they still didn't find her...*

Sam closed the journal and set it under an exposed section of the Mustang. Reading the woman's last words wasn't exactly giving him hope, but it had already taught him something. The cacti he'd so carefully jogged around before were probably the only friends he was going to have. And right now his swelling tongue and blistering lips were screaming for the fluid the little plants could give.

Kneeling down, Sam reached into his boot and slid out a small knife. It wasn't anywhere near the size of the thing Dean hauled around, but it was still perfect for slicing up a reasonably sized Saguaro.

Cutting the cactus off at its base and slicing into it, Sam quickly found the moist center and began to suck out the precious fluid, the cool liquid refreshing him far more than any man-made beverage simply because he was so dehydrated.

After using three of the little plants for sustenance, Sam took up the journal again. The little book had an almost hypnotic effect on him, and he realized that he would be compelled to read it no matter how important other tasks seemed to be.

The journal had already helped him find food, he convinced himself. Maybe Gertrude would show him the way out of the godforsaken place he'd found himself in.

I'm thinking of Gertrude as someone who can help me. Am I nuts?

And yet the feeling didn't go away. Instead, Sam fingered the pages of the diary, flipping through them until he found where he had left off. This time, as he began to read, he did so out loud, his mind actually seeing the events play out in front of him in bright monochrome brilliance as if he were watching a classic wartime movie.

Oct 27th 1944

The clouds are still obscuring the heavens so badly I cannot pinpoint my position. I have to wonder how often a desert sky can be this way, and if I am not jinxed somehow.

Can one person's luck be so bad?

After events earlier this evening, I have to think so. I was harvesting more cacti when I spotted something move next to my hand. Had I not been skittish I would surely be seriously ill by now, as the thing was a scorpion and it lashed out just as I drew away. I am not sure how badly a scorpion's sting would harm me, but in my current situation I can only assume death would follow.

I have to think that if that was the reason I was brought here, then I would surely have died in the crash. Nevertheless, my hope wanes as each hour passes and I find myself missing my loved ones more and more.

If I don't see any rescue planes again tomorrow, then perhaps it is time to admit that I will never see my family again...

Sam closed the book so sharply a small puff of dust rose into the desert from its pages. He'd wanted to read there was still hope.

Dammit, he'd wanted Gertrude to show him a way home. Now, though, all he could think of was just how dangerous the desert could be.

Scorpions, snakes, spiders.

What other poisonous creatures lay in wait as he rested on the shifting sand bank?

Sam realized his breathing had become fast and jerky and he tried to take smaller more careful breaths, but it was no use. Ghosts didn't scare him, supernatural creatures didn't faze him, but suddenly he understood there was one thing he was frightened of even more than death.

Sam was alone.

Hank Pruitt's Home Cibola

"Christo, you sonofabitch!"

Dean dived in front of Hank, tossing holy water from the flask all along the front of the mechanic's shirt. There was no hiss, no rising vapor or stench of burning demon flesh.

Instead, Hank's eyes widened and he looked down incredulously at the wet patch now adorning his best piece of plaid.

After a brief moment he blinked rapidly as if his eyes were deceiving him and then he began to chuckle. It wasn't all-out laughter, just a quiet chortle that seemed to rise from the very bottom of his stomach. "I knew you boys were a little 'off' when I first met ya, but I never pegged you for those religious types..."

Hank continued to find the whole situation amusing as he padded across the kitchen towards the pantry. When the store cupboard's door swung open and Mia emerged, he paused again, and this time his laughter became muted.

"That wasn't a joke was it?" Hank asked, whirling around in his worn ex-army boots to face Dean.

"I err...like to think of it as more of a mistake." Dean squirmed, sliding the flask under his jacket but keeping the .45 in his hand. Just because their host wasn't a demon didn't mean he couldn't be working for one.

"And I suppose that shiny thing in yer hand is a mistake too?" Hank narrowed his eyes, letting them lock cautiously on the Colt.

Dean waved the automatic in front of him. "This? Nah, this isn't a mistake. This is insurance." He smiled, a hint of sarcasm playing across his features as he took in Hank's reaction.

If Hank was afraid, he didn't show it.

“Insurance for what, Sonny? You thinking of taking me out if I don’t finish that car of yours on time?” Hank sniffed.

“I don’t think it’s Dean we have to worry about...” Mia’s huffed voice carried across the kitchen with just enough fear to make the room grow silent.

At first, Dean thought the girl was talking about the mechanic, apportioning blame just because Hank was something of an oddball. She hadn’t hidden her feelings about the man and he seemed the obvious choice. Then the hunter noticed Mia’s startled gaze and followed it.

Outside the tiny kitchen window, where he’d only recently been looking for Sam, was something Dean had never seen the likes of before.

Soil, pebbles and other pieces of debris had been sucked up from Hank’s modest driveway and were being tossed around in a huge funnel outside the back screen door.

Somewhere across the yard, a dog that Dean presumed was Hank’s barked continuously as if the whirlwind was more than just some strange weather phenomenon.

“Well I’ll be damned...I’ve seen some twisters in my time but what the f...?” Hank yanked off his cap and then looked apologetically at Mia. “Sorry ’bout my cussin’. I’m just not used to a lady around the house.”

Dean edged closer to the window, watching as the thing outside grew closer, stronger, more intense until it filled his whole field of vision. “Trust me, Hank,” he offered dryly. “Mia ain’t no lady.” He turned, waiting for the rebuke, and when Mia simply scowled he winked.

“On any other day that might be funny.” Mia joined the hunter and the mechanic, a slight hint of panic in her voice. “Dean, that’s the thing that attacked Joe Bearwalker...”

Dean slowly bobbed his head. He hadn’t really needed confirmation from Mia to know that it was Pazuzu about to tear down Hank’s humble home, but somehow her words made it all the more real. “I know...”

There was a beat, a pause while the hunter tried to think of a plan, hell maybe even an explanation for Hank before he was likely skinned, but neither came to him. If this was some huge demonic game of chess with the Winchesters, then Hell was about to play checkmate.

And all the time, in the back of his head, Dean could only really focus on one thing.

Where’s Sam?

“Dean?” Mia’s voice rose just enough to suggest her fear had been replaced by desperation. “Dean we have to do something or that thing is going to come in here and lay this house to the ground and us with it.”

“Yeah, well in case you hadn’t noticed already, sweetheart, we don’t have a lot of options here.” Dean began looking around the kitchen. Of any place to be trapped by a demon, it was likely the safest – everyone usually had salt – and Hank didn’t strike Dean as a health freak type who was likely too worried about his blood pressure to have any.

“There’s one option.” Mia took down a breath and stepped back into the middle of the room. “I can give the thing what it wants. If I walk out there now this whole thing is over, and you, Hank, Sam, you can all go back to your lives...”

“Are you friggin’ nuts? Did that thing take your brain right along with it when we exorcized it last?” Dean’s face contorted into anger and frustration. Now was just not the time to play heroine. “No, just *no*, alright? I already lost Sammy out there somewhere, I’m not gonna lose you too.”

“People...I don’t mean to be rude here, but would somebody mind telling me just what the heck is going on? What with the twister and all this crazy talk, I feel like I’m smack in the middle of the *Wizard of Oz* here.”

Dean shot the mechanic a look that said “You think *House of Wax* was bad and you watched that crap?” but he didn’t voice his opinion. There was no time to play *The World’s Greatest Movies* any more than there was to discuss Hank’s questionable taste in the big screen.

“Yeah, well you thought the Wicked Witch of the West was bad, wait till you meet the guy outside.” Dean noted a salt cellar on one of the work surfaces and grabbed it. From the weight it only felt about half full. *Not enough to make a circle big enough for one, let alone three...*

“Aww sh...” Hank glanced at Mia again and then outside. If he hadn’t looked scared before, he did now. “I think I see your point,” he said, his mouth opening in something akin to awe. “And he’s one ugly sonofabitch too.”

Dean forgot about the salt and followed Hank’s gaze, realizing the “wind” noise the demon was causing had abruptly calmed. Where the cone-shaped shaft had extended from the ground now stood the most grotesque creature the hunter had ever seen.

It seemed tall – taller than Sam even – and its tail flicked as if it was resisting the urge to lash out and sting someone. Perhaps it was saving that pleasure for when it got inside.

Pazuzu’s eyes glowed a fierce indescribable color, making the lustrous yellow of Haris’ orbs pale into insignificance.

“He is so pissed.” Dean backed up a little, as if his close proximity to the glass would somehow make him the most vulnerable.

Hank scooted to a cabinet discreetly hidden in the corner of the room and retrieved a well-kept Remington side-by-side. He swallowed down the remnants of the tobacco in his mouth without even noticing the nervous reaction. “Would somebody mind telling me just who or what the heck ‘he’ is?” He blinked, looking nervously to Dean. “And, Sonny? I think that repair bill on your car just doubled.”

Dean resisted the urge to smile. Hank was one crazy coot, he’d give the guy that. “Listen, I know I’m gonna sound whacked outta my gourd, but that thing is a demon. I...we thought maybe you were it. That’s why I tossed the holy water on you.”

“Demon as in ‘I’m from Hell and I’m gonna fry your a...butt?’” Hank broke open his weapon and slid in two shells. Every few seconds, he peered back outside, apparently expecting the creature to have vanished.

“Yeah, basically,” Mia agreed. “It’s from Hell, and it’s gonna burn our asses, big time.” She looked to Dean, not biting back her language just because the mechanic had. “It wants me. I still say we should give it the prize.”

“You’re not being anybody’s prize, and that’s final.” Dean tossed the salt cellar over to the mechanic. “You got any more of this stuff?”

Hank considered it and then opened up the pantry Mia had hidden in. He reappeared seconds later with two tubs of cooking salt that may have been in the cupboard since Nixon had been President.

Blowing dust from the top of the containers he grinned.

“Okay, start pouring it around the window frames, door frames and if there’s enough left make a circle big enough for us to stand in on the floor...” Dean stuffed his .45 back into his waistband and returned to the window ledge.

Pazuzu had disappeared from view and Dean didn’t think he’d decided to call back later. This was one door-to-door salesman that wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

“Supposing I *believe* I’m under siege by a creature from the *Twilight Zone*; you mind telling me how a line of salt is gonna save my um...butt?” Hank continued to pour with one hand, but kept his trusty shotgun tucked under one arm.

“It’s a long story, but those freaky-eyed suckers can’t cross it. If...when we hook back up with Sammy I’ll get geekboy to give you the *Encyclopedia Britannica* version, but right now, you just gotta trust me.”

Hank stopped pouring and squirmed. He looked to Mia and then Dean as if what he was about to say may well be dumb, but he just had to say it anyway. "They can't cross salt, huh? But don't that mean neither can we or we get to play Dorothy, all scooped up and flung around in that twister?" He cocked a brow. "That thing can just wait us on out until we starve or die of boredom – and people, no offence, but you don't strike me as the most entertaining couple with all your quibbling..."

Dean wanted to point out that he and Mia were *not exactly* a "couple" but realized it was a moot point. If he didn't come up with an idea, they wouldn't be anything *period* except a pile of stripped flesh.

"Dude, I hate to say it but you're probably right. Unless you happen to know Father Merrin, I'd say we're pretty much full-on screwed."

"And then some," Mia added with a wince.

Hank rifled through his pockets for a new chunk of something to chew on, and when he came up empty huffed. He chewed out of habit, and it seemed the habit was better than a bottle of Prozac right now.

"Hell, we haven't had a preacher in these parts for two summers, boy," he answered with a strained sigh. "And he was kinda more into the New Age stuff, if you know what I mean..."

Dean shook his head and pressed into his temple with his thumb and forefinger in impatience. "Jeez, haven't you people ever seen *The Exorcist*? This is the same friggin' demon..."

"Merrin," Mia added, "was the priest who dealt with him in the movie."

Hank wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and pointed his twelve gauge at the door leading into the kitchen. Taking a tentative step forward he joined the hunter and girl in the salt circle he'd made. "I don't watch those horror flicks too often. Always thought they were stuff and nonsense."

Dean stuck a hand in his jacket and retrieved two shotgun cartridges. His own weapons, save for the .45, were still in the Impala's trunk, so he handed the ammunition to the mechanic. "You might wanna load up with these instead of your regulars."

Hank took the shells, examining them as he changed them over in his Remington. "Salt shells can hurt this thing?"

"Nope," Dean admitted. "But they can sure as hell piss him off."

Mia grabbed Dean's arm, stopping him telling their host that pissing the demon off might not be their best plan. Her fingers dug into his flesh until her nails drew a short line of blood and she began to shake.

Dean didn't need to ask why.

Mia had dealt with Pazuzu before. She knew him.

She knew he was coming in.

A loud bang followed by a destructive splintering sound suggested the demon had entered via the front screen door, tearing it and its frame away from the rest of the house with just its forward momentum.

The crashing sound was followed by more noise, as if the whirlwind had returned, forming an icy, devastating zephyr that was ripping the farmhouse to shreds.

Chairs were torn into masses of wood, material and stuffing. Ornaments were tossed from their resting places and smashed into the walls until only miniscule porcelain shards remained.

A portrait of Hank's father was drawn into the center of the demonic tornado, only to be ejected at hundreds of miles an hour, disintegrating with the force with which it was being handled.

Within seconds, the front room of the farmhouse had been rendered into nothing more than a wooden husk stripped bare of life's essentials.

The crashing sound came again, and with it, the door to the kitchen was blown from its hinges into the modest dining area. Wooden splinters shot through the air like spear-shaped projectiles, searching, needing to harm someone.

Dean quickly put his arm around Mia, turning her, and turning with her to shield her from the spiky onslaught.

Hank faced-off the timber spears, allowing several to slice into his flesh just so he could get a clean shot at the demon. Pulling back on the shotgun's trigger twice, he emptied both barrels into the deformed and grotesque thing now standing in his kitchen.

Pazuzu hadn't expected such insolence and his unseemly form was propelled backwards out of the room with a roar of defiance.

Dean, Hank and Mia heard the thing's heavy, ungainly form landing somewhere in the room it had just destroyed.

They heard its growl as it began to pick up its malformed frame.

And soon, all three knew it would return for them.

And this time, they didn't even have any more shells to fight with...

Sonoran Desert

Sam didn't really know how long it had taken for the true degree of his solitude to kick in after reading Gertrude's entry. It could have been minutes, it could have been hours. All he really had to go on was the sun's position in the sky, and how it still seemed too hot to try and walk out of his sandbox prison.

Gertrude had thought that too, for a while.

Too hot.

Too futile.

But in the end, she had finally given in and started walking – at least, that was what her diary's last entry had said. Maybe he should too.

Sam nibbled on the pulp of another cactus, letting the moisture wet his mouth, even if it didn't quench his thirst. How long could he last like this anyway?

He tossed the stump of the plant he'd been eating, watching as it bounced from the metal fuselage of the plane and landed somewhere out of sight.

The plane.

Why couldn't that help him? Why couldn't there have been some kind of long lost survival kit on board?

Sam's head jerked up as he thought he heard a sound behind him. For a brief moment, a shadow fell across where he was slumped, but then was gone.

A fleeting silhouette playing with his subconscious.

I'll walk alone because, to tell you the truth, I'll be lonely

I don't mind being lonely

When my heart tells me you are lonely, too

Words began to filter across the dunes, a sweet harmony with the same eerie, hollow, sound from before. This time, it wasn't "Big Band" music, but the hunter instantly recognized it as the type of tune played constantly during the Second World War.

This was the kind of song Gertrude would have listened to and enjoyed.

Sam tried to swallow but found his throat was too dry again. He coughed instead, eyes straying towards the half-buried Mustang as he realized the music was emanating from it.

It seemed he and Gertrude had something in common. They had both been stranded here in their respective decades, and now, now somehow they had been brought together and the flyer was letting him know she could help him.

Scrambling to his feet, Sam skidded down the ridge he'd been resting on, his boots sinking into the sand as he made a dive for the crashed plane. He had to reach it. He had to find the source of the music.

The cockpit still lay open as he'd left it, and as his eyes locked on the radio unit, Sam instantly understood what he was hearing.

Somehow, the Mustang's battery was fueling the tiny receiver. It should be long dead and devoid of all power, just like its former owner. And yet, the thing still hissed and crackled with life as Dinah Shore's classic continued to resonate across the Sonora.

Sam leaned inside carefully, finding the tuner to change the frequency. He had to find a different station, something more modern. He had to find a way to transmit as well as receive.

The dial slowly moved as he teased at it with a shaking hand, and eventually another familiar voice broke through.

Sam's mouth opened and he heaved out a breath in defeat as Jack Benny began to crack another gag. This was a working radio, but it was also a radio trapped in a long dead era with only long dead transmissions playing out through its speakers.

"I'm going to die here," he mouthed, only realizing after that he was mimicking yet another sentence from Gertrude's journal.

History was repeating itself.

Sam ran a hand over his mouth, feeling the flesh on his lips peeling. Suddenly, he didn't want to wait for nightfall to make an escape attempt anymore. He wanted to run screaming away from this strange metallic epitaph.

Shielding his eyes, he looked up to the sun, and then to the horizon. There was no surefire way to tell which direction would take him out of the desert, but he wasn't even sure he cared anymore.

Anywhere was better than here. Hadn't even Gertrude decided that?

Maybe the desert was haunted or cursed?

Pushing away from the Mustang's frame, Sam gathered up his remaining harvested Saguaro and began to walk, his feet dragging through the sand because his muscles were too tired to make them move properly.

A bizarre track began to emerge like a twin snake trail as he stumbled onwards, his mind reeling and his limbs failing him.

How long can I go on like this? How long before I fall flat on my butt and die here?

Sam didn't think it would be long, but he fought it. He fought it because in the back of his mind all he could see was Dean finding his bleached bones and wondering what had happened in those last, ephemeral moments of life.

I'll always be near you wherever you are each night

In every prayer

If you call I'll hear you, no matter how far

Just close your eyes and I'll be there

The ancient song was following him as he trudged onwards, echoing through the halls of his mind rather than the desert that entrapped him.

And Sam did pray, that perhaps in some kooky mechanic's home his brother was already formulating a plan to find him.

It was the only thing that he could cling onto.

The only thing keeping him breathing.

Sam felt his foot slip and he realized he'd reached another incline. As he concentrated all his energy on climbing it, the wartime song magically vanished. It was like Gertrude, or maybe just his fevered mind, knew he needed to put his full attention elsewhere.

Something's still toying with me...

Sam continued unabashed, perspiration pouring from his brow as he climbed the slope almost on all fours.

There has to be a house, a river, a road...just let me see a road...

Jagged, jutting rocks cut into the flesh on his palms until he left a widening slick of blood in his wake, but he wouldn't surrender, scaling the rise with a new kind of vigor born of desolation, not just desperation.

Sand and dust covered his skin and clothes until he looked almost as much a wraith as some of the creatures he had hunted. His lips were cracked until the open welts felt raw, but still he refused to collapse.

Sam refused to just give in and die, because Dean would never forgive him.

At the top of the desert summit he finally let his muscles give in, collapsing to his knees as his body felt like he'd spontaneously combusted. Sam didn't know how he knew, but he was convinced if anyone had been standing over him, they'd have sensed the heat radiating from his overheated frame like they were standing in front of an open fire.

He coughed again, hands spread out in front of him to steady his quivering form.

Taking a deep breath, Sam forced his head up, the weight on his shoulders almost impossible to support.

Where he had hoped to find some signs of life was nothing more than a vast expanse of scarred arid wasteland.

There was nothing.

The reality hit home like the buzzards were already picking the dead flesh from his bones, and Sam finally accepted it. Letting his body fall forwards, he buckled, slumping onto the awaiting sand like it was a freshly made bed inviting his arrival.

Sam sucked down a breath, taking in a small spray of sand with it. He was so thirsty, so desperately thirsty...

Sam blinked, trying to force the same dryness from his eyes, and it was then he finally saw her.

Perhaps a mirage, perhaps a dying man's last dream of hope, but at the bottom of the slope, Gertrude Tompkins Silver stood in all her former glory. Her uniform was crisp and clean and her hair perfectly pinned under her cap.

The flyer's eyes looked up with a strange spark of recognition as he stared down at her, and Sam realized with a certainty that she had been waiting for him here.

Gertrude smiled at his realization, an outstretched hand beckoning the young hunter to join her.

Sam shook his head, attempting to convince himself her image would blur and vanish, but Gertrude remained solidly before him on the open landscape below.

Did he really have anything to lose by not following?

If I can even stand...

Sam tried to make his shaking legs bear his weight, pushing up with his forearms like a toddler learning to walk for the first time. His muscles spasmed and for a moment he thought he would fall again. Then, his knees locked and somehow he was able to stand.

His stance was that of a drunken partygoer, but Sam didn't care.

Gertrude gestured again, her smile becoming so intoxicating the hunter couldn't fight its effects. He stumbled forwards, not even heeding the steep gradient he was about to clamber down.

He wanted, needed this to be over and if that meant death, then so be it.

Taking a step over the edge, Sam instantly felt his boots begin to sink heavily into the sand. He was slipping, and there weren't even any jutting rocks to grab this side to slow his fall. He tried anyway, huge hands digging into the soft terrain and coming away empty.

Tiny loose boulders littered the incline, and as he slithered further and faster they began to fall with him, forming a strange and unsightly landslide.

For a time, Sam felt like he was a kid again and his mind turned to one long winter when he and Dean had slid down a snow-covered embankment like this to while away the hours.

Except, ultimately, this wasn't snow, and at the base of this hill were sharp, deadly rocks that could smash human bones to smithereens should they impact on the harsh stones at enough speed.

Sam blinked, and as his boot caught on one of the falling rocks, he realized he had probably made the last bad judgment call of his life. The jarring motion from the small boulder twisted his gangly frame, and suddenly instead of simply sliding, Sam was tumbling, rolling, bouncing, until he had no control over where he was about to land.

And below, the protruding desert boulders waited patiently.

Hank Pruitt's Home

Cibola

"Dang, if that thing ain't a hard ass." Hank listened to the strange slithering sound as Pazuzu whipped across his lounge, tossing down his shotgun in disgust at its lack of usefulness. "Times like these I wished I'd listened to my granddaddy about praying..."

"We don't need to pray," Mia asserted. "We need to let him have what he wants. We can't win in a straight fight. There's only one way to get rid of this thing and that's exorcism."

"Yeah, well, even if I had Sammy's pack of favorite crayons handy, I don't think we exactly have time to be scrawling a Devil's Trap around here." Dean raised a brow, but his usual playful smirk was nowhere in sight.

In the doorway, the monstrous visage of Pazuzu reappeared. His maw opened and a hollow growl resounded through the kitchen. To Dean, the sound was almost like that of a Hell Hound – only more guttural.

Pazuzu noted the hunter flinch and knew he was dealing with someone familiar to his kind. The demon's head cocked and his hideous muzzle seemed to contort into an animalistic sneer.

"Hell, I've heard of crossbreeds, but your one ugly mother..."

The demon appeared to appreciate the comment, his tail flicking across the kitchen so swiftly several cupboards were destroyed by its razor-like motion.

As the stinger swished backwards, Pazuzu's body began to spin until all that could be seen was a vortex of rapidly gyrating air and loose utensils from the surrounding room.

"Whoa, we got ourselves a regular *Taz* here don't we?" Dean winced. "Next thing you know Bugs will be making a freakin' cameo." His eyes narrowed and he looked at the mechanic warily. "Guess you could pass for Elmer in a pinch..."

Hank shook his head and looked to Mia as if at least one of their group had gone a little crazy. "Honey, your boyfriend's car ain't the only thing not firing on all cylinders around here."

"Don't worry about him," Mia replied, backing away from the edge of the circle they stood in. "He's always that way. What we really need to worry about is *that*." She pointed downwards to the rapidly vanishing line of salt at their feet.

While Pazuzu couldn't cross the protective circle, he was easily moving it with the harsh wind his spinning was creating. Grain by grain, the salt was being blown away until soon they would have no barrier to save them from the vicious demon's wrath.

Mia turned, grabbing Dean's forearm until he was looking her in the eye. They'd been through enough together back in Texas for him to at least listen and respect what she had to say.

"We can't win this while he's in that form. You have to see that?" She tightened her grip. "I'm the cause of this, let me be the solution. Let him possess me, it's the only way you stand a chance of exorcising that bastard..."

Dean pulled away, sensing the creature growing nearer but not caring. He'd almost lost Mia to a pack of chupas, he wasn't going to lose her to the very thing he'd promised to protect her from.

“And what if that freak doesn’t want to possess you anymore?” He began to shout, his words almost becoming lost over the rising noise Pazuzu’s whirlwind was creating. “What if he just wants to tear you a new one, huh?”

“That’s not his M.O. and you know it! In my body, maybe you and Hank can overpower it enough to exorcize it for good –” Mia yanked at the chain around her neck, giving the small charm one last look before tossing it to the floor.

She was unprotected now. Vulnerable again.

“Like all the other times? Are you friggin’ nuts? No way!” Dean reached out to grab Mia’s arm, needing to feel some kind of unconscious contact, but it was her turn to jar away. “Mia!”

Mia closed her eyes, pushing aside the hunter’s pleas as she took a step out of the waning circle. Instantly, the sound of the howling wind was replaced by a silent lull that took over the whole kitchen.

It was like standing in the eye of a storm – Dean knew that from firsthand experience.

What he didn’t know was what the semi-placated demon would do next.

Pazuzu slowed, his tornado-like motion becoming nothing more than a slow spin. His strangely colored orbs shone with an even brighter radiance as he appeared to relish his victory.

The demon took down a long breath, staring again for the longest time at Dean before he closed his wildly feral eyes and began to change. His solid form began to melt like an ice cap thawed by the summer sun, and in just a few short moments Pazuzu had dissipated from something having a real presence into nothing more than a thick black smog that flowed and ebbed around Mia’s feet.

Although the girl’s eyes remained closed, she gasped as the blackness touched her legs, intertwining itself with her mortal being as it leisurely worked its way up her body.

“No! You *sonofabitch!* Don’t you touch her! Don’t you dare touch her!” Dean yelled out his threats and was barely held back inside the remaining salt lines by Hank’s firm grip.

He’d seen Mia possessed too many times now, but not like this.

Not giving herself to the damn thing. For *him*.

The oozing raven miasma didn’t seem to hear his threats, or if it did, it wasn’t intimidated by them. Pazuzu’s true self appeared to wrap around Mia’s neck and seemed to pulse there like it was waiting for some unseen command.

In the center of the blackness, a new solid shape began to develop, and as Dean and Hank watched, the demon’s animal features reformed just for a split second.

And Pazuzu laughed.

Not an evil chortle, not even a frightening cackle – simply a triumphant statement of fact that he had won – again.

As the laughter ended, Mia screamed and the obsidian smog billowed outwards like a sudden explosion was sending it into oblivion. At the last moment, the fog appeared to retrace its path at high speed, giving the effect that it was now being sucked backwards into Mia.

For Dean, it was like watching the scene on rewind.

Mia yelled again, and as the last of her scream left her lips she collapsed onto the kitchen floor.

This time, Hank couldn’t hold the hunter back.

Dean tore away from the mechanic’s grip and skidded down onto one knee, knowing there was very little time if they had any chance of still winning the fight.

“Hank, grab something to tie her! Rope, cord, dammit, anything!” Dean rolled the unconscious girl onto her stomach, grabbing her hands behind her back ready to secure them. Even now, he could feel movement in her muscles as Pazuzu once again took his hold.

Behind him, the hunter heard cursing and the cold-room open before Hank finally returned with a short length of rope. Why the mechanic kept it in the pantry was anyone's guess, but today Dean was glad of it.

Wrapping the rope around Mia's wrists several times he yanked down hard, making a secure knot that would probably cut off blood flow if left too long.

Not that he expected the rope to even hold her that length of time – not with the strength of a demon inside her.

"Now what? You mean to tell me that thing is in the gal now?" Hank had taken off his cap and was scratching at his forehead as if the motion would invite his brain back to the party.

Dean followed Hank's move, running his hand back through the spikes of his hair in concentration.

This was the part Sammy usually took care of.

The part I can never friggin' remember...

"We gotta exorcise that freaky puppy before Mia stops fighting him and he wakes up and kicks our asses. That's what..."

Dean pushed up from his crouched position and tried to think. He'd tried to recall the *Rituale Romanum* word for word so many times, but somehow it just would never stick in his brain. It wasn't that he couldn't be bothered, it was more like a mental block he'd never been able to get past.

Right now, that fritzing piece of Winchester cerebrum was probably going to get him killed.

Remember Sammy. Just remember Sammy, for crying out loud...

And somehow, Dean did.

Words began to roll from his mouth, but in his mind it was Sam he could see and hear doing the exorcism. It was like Sam speaking through him, even though it was really some deep, dark recess of his mind he couldn't normally access.

"Exorcizo te, omnis spiritus immunde, in nomine Dei..."

Mia's head snapped up and her eyes jerked open to glower at both men. The corners of her mouth began to crease until she was smiling like someone who had just won the lottery. If the rite was bothering her, she didn't show it.

"You should know by now, Dean, that I don't go into the night easily..." Mia pulled at her bonds, splitting the strands that formed the rope as if they were made from paper.

As her arms became free, she back-flipped into an upright position faster and more lithely than any circus performer. Her hand made it to a half outstretched, offensive position before she was flung across the kitchen by the impact of a chair leg.

Hank grinned as he tossed the broken piece of furniture to the floor and dived like a Kamikaze on top of the girl, attempting to pin her for as long as his rather excessive weight would allow. "Sorry, missy, I ain't usually this forward with the ladies, but right now, you sure ain't no lady..."

Dean's eyes widened and his mouth opened, but instead of making a wiseass comment, he continued with the ritual while his mind still allowed the rite to flow freely.

"...Sancti, ut descedas ab hoc plasmate Dei..."

Mia screeched an inhuman wail that had all the resonance of someone scratching their fingernails down a chalkboard. Her muscles convulsed and contorted until it appeared as if every strand of sinew in her body would snap.

And now, as she writhed under Hank's prone body, it was easily apparent her extra strength was waning.

It was cruel to watch, cruel to inflict, and yet it had to be done. Dean pushed onwards, his Latin dialogue surprising Hank with its fluidity and precision.

When the ritual was completed, he sagged to his knees, the energy sapped from him as surely as it had been sapped from Mia.

"Is it over?" The mechanic blinked, examining the girl he still straddled for signs of possession.

"It's done you great big ox, and if you don't get your ass off of me your jewels will be feeling my kneecap to prove it..." Mia let her head fall back onto the kitchen floor in exhaustion, but there was still enough strength to her voice to scare Hank into submission.

Hank rolled free from her body and eyed her wearily before retreating to recover his recently lost shotgun from the life-sized trashcan that was now his home.

Dean smirked as the mechanic looked twice at the gun and then dropped it back on the floor, realizing it held little worth on this very crazy day.

Leaning forward, Dean sifted through the rubble and smashed crockery until he saw the familiar glint of the thing he was searching for.

Plucking the charm from its hiding place among the clutter, he held it over the panting girl with a soft but pleading look on his face that was the nearest Dean Winchester ever came to begging.

He raised a brow. "You know the scene in *House of Wax* where Mr. Creepy glues the chick's lips?" The familiar cocky smile began to seep into the edges of his features.

"Um, yeah pretty much," Mia offered, pushing up onto her elbows in curiosity.

"Well, pull a stunt like that again, and I'm gonna do pretty much the same and stick this thing to your butt – and I can tell you, I'll sure as hell enjoy doing it." He winked, trying to be playful even though he truly knew what Mia had almost sacrificed again.

How could Sam ever think she wasn't batting for their team? *How could he have said such cruel things, made such accusations?* The questions revolved in the hunter's mind as he gave Mia a hand up and helped her into a chair.

She was bruised, battered, and still she'd come out fighting to the end.

And yet, Sammy's hunches are rarely off base...

No way, Mia's a friggin' martyr!

The mental battle continued as he checked Mia over, stopping to wince at the purple bruising already appearing where Hank's hands had dug into her flesh to hold her. "I would ask if you're okay, but I get the feeling you'd only chew me out."

"And then some, Winchester." Mia smiled, biting her lip as she touched her side where Hank's chair leg had impacted. "But hey, I might just have to get myself possessed all over again-" She ran a hand gently over the growth of stubble on his chin. "You know how sexy you sound when you spout that Latin crap?"

At the mention of the *Rituale Romanum*, he pulled away, all thoughts turning to the one who had helped him recite it.

Sammy...

Mia might be safe for a little while, but Sam was alone, God only knew where, and Pazuzu might just be after his ass as much as anyone's.

Sam was a thorn in the demon's side as much as Dean was.

"Hank, you got any spray paint around here?" Dean shot the puzzled mechanic a quick glance, avoiding Mia's curious gaze.

Hank rubbed at his ear absently and then turned to shuffle back into the pantry. When his head popped back out, it was shortly followed by a hand waving a small aerosol of green automotive paint.

Dean blinked. "Is there anything you *don't* have in that friggin' stash hole?"

Mia clambered up from the floor, absently brushing dust and small pieces of debris from her jeans. "Trust me, you so don't want to know-"

"Thought so..." Dean grabbed the can from Hank's extended hand and kneeled, quickly beginning to spray onto a relatively clear patch of flooring. Within seconds, the symbols became recognizable as those in a protective circle – obvious, at least, to a hunter or anyone with supernatural knowledge.

"You think that freak will come back *that* quickly?" Mia licked away a small blob of blood from her lower lip and joined the hunter in a crouch.

"Nope," Dean admitted, finishing off his somewhat crude but effective handiwork. "But if he does, I'll at least know you're safe while I'm gone."

"Gone? You can't just up and leave me here. Not after...not after what just happened..."

Dean took Mia's arm and gently tugged her over into the Devil's Trap. He wanted to hug her, to kiss her and tell her he'd never leave her again, but he couldn't.

Not while Sam was missing.

Not while the only constant in his life might be in danger.

"I have to go look for Sam, and it won't be safe for you." Dean jerked his head towards the shotgun on the floor and then shifted his gaze to Hank. "Dude, can you toss me that and then go grab some spare salt shells from the Impala?"

When Hank nodded obediently and picked up the gun, Dean returned his attention to Mia. "We'll leave you some weapons, but you gotta understand I can't leave Sammy at that thing's mercy. For all I know it somehow split us up on purpose in the first place. Divide and conquer or something..."

"It's me it wants. It's always me." Mia crossed her arms and huffed like a spoiled child, and for the briefest second Dean thought she was going to condemn him for caring about anyone but her.

She sighed, and all the anger seemed to exit her along with the air from her lungs. "I'm sorry," she said flatly. "I just get so damn tired of this crap."

"Me too, sweetheart. Me too..." *So much you'll never know.*

Dean spun on his heels and met Hank in the doorway as the mechanic returned with the shells. He took the box of ammo from his host, tossing it to Mia.

She grabbed the carton with one hand. "Just remember, chicks only dig so many scars, dude. Don't go getting more anytime soon, okay?"

"It's a deal," Dean agreed, plucking his .45 out from under his jacket, much to Hank's chagrin. "Besides, I'm just gonna go find Sasquatch's gigantor-sized ass and drag it back here. He's probably chatting up some chick in a local bar or something."

Hank huffed and his face scrunched up so tightly he looked like a wizened piece of fruit on a bad day. "Fella, have you seen the kind of talent on offer in our local bar? Even your brother ain't warped enough to go for somethin' that damned ugly."

Dean slipped out onto the porch and looked around for the mechanic's truck. The pale blue '67 Ford pickup was sitting next to the house with its windows down. "Mind if you give me a ride there, Hank?"

Pruitt looked over his shoulder to the remnants of his house and then tugged out the Ford's keys from his pocket. "Hell no. Not like I got anything to be doing around here 'cept for rebuilding my house..."

Dean smirked, admiring the mechanic's dry humor that some people would probably mistake for ignorance. Hank might come across as a complete yokel, but looks could be deceiving.

The hunter jogged over to the pickup and pulled himself onto the bench seat as Hank turned over the ignition. The V8 grumbled begrudgingly to life and began to rattle like a bag of marbles.

Dean winced. "Dude, tell me you fix gearboxes way better than you work on engines?"

Hank chomped on a fresh chunk of tobacco he'd retrieved from the glove box and then patted the sun-bleached dashboard affectionately. "Sonny, I ain't done a speck a work on this beauty since I owned her, and she ain't never let me down once. Now quit worrying about your wheels and let's go find your brother."

Dean bit into his bottom lip and nodded. The problem was, where to start. There wasn't much outside the few homes that speckled Cibola except desert and a few back roads. It was hard to believe Sam had tried to traverse either of the latter two.

Unless he's hitching a ride again like the time we argued about dad...

...and look how great that friggin' worked out. The jerk found himself a new demon buddy named Meg!

"Listen, Hank, Sam was pretty pissed at me and I guess maybe I deserved it. Is there anywhere around here he could have gone just to cool off? You know, somewhere in walking distance he coulda stayed the night?"

Hank gripped the huge wheel of the truck with one hand, letting his free arm dangle from the window as if it would cool his whole body down. He took down a breath in thought and then spat a wad of tobacco out over his arm.

Dean could have sworn he saw the wad smack some kind of lizard as if the mechanic had been purposefully aiming for it, and for a second he gaped.

"I don't think your brother will have gone far on foot. Not in this heat," Pruitt eventually offered.

Dean nodded knowingly. Hank was suggesting, without actually saying, that Sam could die out in the wilderness in less time than he'd been missing. Sunstroke alone would be enough, without all the other dangers present in such an arid and somewhat hostile environment.

"That's what I'm afraid of." He rubbed at his forehead, wishing for once, just once that John could be here for him instead of being AWOL.

But as usual, without Sam, he was nothing but alone.

Sonoran Desert

Sam felt sharp fangs biting into his yielding flesh, and he realized too late that he had been more than stupid to race into the vampires nest without backup.

Vampires?

The young hunter squeezed open his eyelids just enough for his pupils to be visible through the slits.

The sunlight that entered reminded him that he *hadn't* been fighting vampires.

No, he had been fighting a long fall that ultimately led to a very sharp and painful end – an end he was now feeling in all its insane glory.

The fangs he could feel sinking into him were jagged rocks that had no doubt mangled his body until he was only sensing half the pain he should be.

Sam tried to move anyway – he tried to lift his head just enough to see where he had landed – and ultimately, where he would die.

The movement wasn't as excruciating as he'd expected, but still the effort it took reminded him that he was near the end of his physical limitations without any injuries he may have sustained.

Still, the view the movement gave allowed him to see that Gertrude's beckoning figure had vanished. Not that the news was good, given what had replaced her ethereal form.

On the sandy outcrop where the flyer had been standing was something Sam easily recognized.

Bones.

Not just animal bones, but the yellow-white aged bones of a human skeleton, and from their position on the ground, it looked like the person – Gertrude – had died here.

The bones haven't been scattered by animals, this is where she died, just like I'm going to.

Sam considered why the downed pilot had been so insistent on calling him here. Had she wanted him to die in the same manner she had?

Sam's head dropped back onto the desert and he felt the heat of the sand beneath, warming his flesh. It reminded him of more recent, happier times when he and Dean had visited Miami. The gig they'd been on had kept them busy, but even the hunters had managed a little R & R before they'd moved on to their next hunt.

But there would be no more hunts – not for Sam.

Dean would have to continue on alone.

Dean wouldn't simply lie down and die like this. Winchesters don't go out without a fight, dammit!

Sam tried to think of all the times his brother had cheated death. All the times he'd fought the odds and won – even against a reaper. *Am I going to go out without even trying?*

Sam moved his left arm, and when the small maneuver didn't make him want to throw up, he continued until both his palms were facing down under his chest.

All he had to do now was push and he *should* be able to get up – pain or no damn pain.

But *thinking* something was way easier than actually doing it.

Sam put all the strength he had left into his arms, wanting, willing them to lock as he forced upwards. His frame shook with the strain, perspiration dripping from his forehead as he tensed every muscle that still worked.

For a moment, his body teetered and he thought he would make it, but instead, his arms simply failed him, collapsing until he was once again nothing more than a heap of skin and bone in the Sonora that would soon become buzzard feed.

How will Dean tell dad?

It was an insane thought, given that John Winchester had seemingly abandoned his sons once again in favor of the hunt, and yet it was something he couldn't push from his mind.

Sam tried to laugh, but his throat was too dry even for that one last guilty pleasure. He coughed instead, pausing his fit of dry retching only when he felt something tingle across the back of his hand.

It was a familiar feeling, but he couldn't place it. All that he knew was that it was a bad omen – a sign perhaps – that his time was almost at an end.

Sam let his neck roll sideways until he had a view of the hand in question. The open palm was innocent enough, but the shadow that fell over it was a far more ominous one.

On any other day, the scorpion was a thing Sam could have crushed under his boot or nudged with his toecap to send skittering away into the wastelands.

But today, in his fading condition, it was the last straw.

And it was poised to strike, stinger at the ready as if he had angered it in some way. Perhaps he had, encroaching into its natural habitat.

Despite the knowledge that he would be too late, Sam instinctively tried to jerk his hand away from the desert creature. It was a reflex action more than anything, and he should have known better, but right now, what was there to lose?

Sam's limb moved back so sluggishly from fatigue and exposure to the desert heat that he never had any chance of evading the poisonous barb.

Make it quick...

Maybe he'd never intended to.

As the poison seeped into his system, Sam let his eyes close for the last time. He wanted to sleep forever, he wanted to dream of Jess and Mary, and forget that places like Hell really existed.

But most of all, he wished that he'd had the chance to say goodbye to Dean.

Old Ghost Town

Hank Pruitt killed the Ford's engine before its wheels had even come to a stop. The truck groaned as he applied the brakes, making the shoes squeal as they pushed on ancient drums.

The mechanical scream was the only sound that permeated the localized ruins. This town wasn't just old, it was dead.

Dean rubbed away a trickle of sweat before it had chance to drop into his eye and then pushed open the pick-up's door. Metal ground on metal much like the sound of his beloved Impala's hinges, and he couldn't help but smirk at the grating aria.

"I'm thinking this is the only place your brother could have stayed for the night around these parts." Hank spat another wad of tobacco from his mouth and then pointed to a few ramshackle structures that had barely survived the passage of time.

Dean squinted, shielding sunlight from his eyes to survey the buildings. Most didn't have roofs left, let alone offer any kind of shelter. Only one stood out to him – and that was probably because it had once been a bar. "Why would Sammy wait out here? I mean, yeah, he was pissed at me last night, but now?"

The hunter moved into the center of the deserted town and kicked at a decomposing water butt. The mite-infested container disintegrated as his CAT boot impacted, leaving only the metal bands behind that had encircled its timber laths. "What if that friggin' demon got out here before it got to your house?"

"Well, unless your bad guy got a tracking device on your brother's butt, I think it's a good guess it ain't been out here." Hank stretched his shoulders absently and then turned, plucking a somewhat dusty Mossberg from the rack attached to the Ford's cab. "Besides, you can't always go around thinking the worst. Hell, boy, you so need to start thinking that the glass is half full, ya know?"

The mechanic wiggled his eyebrows for effect and then slid out from behind the truck's wheel. Nudging the door closed with the butt of the Mossberg, he slowly ambled across to where Dean was standing, avoiding a ball of tumbleweed as it gently bobbed in front of him.

"Trust me, after the morning we've had, the only glass I want is a full one, preferably whiskey." Dean let his eyes shift to Hank just for a moment and then he kneeled, searching the sandy earth at his feet for Sasquatch-sized imprints. Rubbing a hand over the ground, he suddenly wished he had some of his brother's freaky sixth sense. Still, even without it, if Sam had been here, then maybe he'd left some trace behind.

Sam wasn't an M&M fan, so it was no use looking for a colorful candy trail, but Sammy was smart. If he was in trouble, he'd find something to use. *If Pazuzu hasn't skinned him alive with that freakin' kick-ass tail already...*

Hank pointed towards a group of half-collapsed outbuildings with his shotgun, ignoring his companion's uncertainty. "Gonna start taking a look around. Holler if you need me."

Dean bobbed his head in agreement and then straightened out, wiping the dust from his palms down the front of his jeans. For some reason, the saloon he'd spotted earlier still called out to him more than any of the other collapsing edifices.

Taking tentative steps forward, he climbed onto the decaying porch and slowly pulled his .45 from his waistband. The weapon shook slightly in his grip, and he quickly flexed his fingers over the ivory, urging them to stop trembling. Sam's gonna be okay, his mind soothed. *Sammy's always okay. He's got his big bro looking after his ass.*

Except, for once, Dean had put someone else before Sam. *Sammy's wrong about Mia...*

Maybe Sam was wrong, but did it even matter? *I shouldn't have let him storm off. I shouldn't have gone off half-cocked like a goddamn ass...*

Pushing through the doorway, Dean was plunged into a shadowy darkness that felt cold – devoid of life. He shuddered, plucking his Maglite from his top jacket pocket before continuing further inside.

Perhaps the sun was scorching out in the open, but in here there was an unnatural chill to the air that he rarely felt, even in the presence of the dead.

"Sammy, if I find you snoring your ass off under some tatty blanket I'm so gonna make you walk it back to Hank's..." The words seemed to bounce off the wooden

walls, echoing back to the hunter like a supernatural taunt, while cobwebs fluttered around him in a breeze that apparently had no origin.

Dean tried to ignore the chill, the breeze, the echoing of his own voice off the walls. He wasn't here to get spooked, he was here to find Sam. But then, it was Sam's absence that was making him freak, wasn't it?

Twisting the Maglite so that the beam widened, he moved on, careful of his footing on the crumbling timbers. In the doorway to the next room he paused again, letting the light pan across the area in front of him.

Halfway through his sweep, the beam began to shake as it fell across a figure on the floor.

Sammy!

The Colt in Dean's hand almost slipped through his fingers and he was powerless to stop it. His legs, his arms – his whole body had abruptly turned to jelly.

He had let this happen.

Dean felt dizzy and his vision began to cloud like a freshly made glass of lemonade. In a panicked heartbeat, he realized he had somehow forgotten the most basic element of survival – to breathe.

Sucking down a lungful of stale, musty air, he stumbled forward until he was level with Sam. It wasn't easy, given his brother's prone position behind the bar counter, but somehow he managed to squat down level with Sam's head.

"Hank! Hank, get your ass in here!" Dean placed his .45 on the counter and let his knees drop onto the wooden floor. He was going to need help to carry Sam out – at least, he hoped he was going to need help. He's just unconscious. *Stupid Sasquatch probably bumped his head on the low friggin' ceiling here or something...*

"Sam? Sam...Sammy, wake up dammit before I kick your ass..."

"Son, did anyone tell you, you have the lousiest bedside manner? Good thing you didn't want to be a doctor when you grew up..."

Dean dared to take his eyes from his brother just long enough to see Pruitt scowling at him in the doorway. He didn't even try to consider how the mechanic had gotten here so fast. Still, without even a rebuke, his attention was back to Sam.

Sam's complexion looked stony pale in the waning light of the saloon, but perhaps that was simply the shadows playing tricks. A thin bead of perspiration ran across the fallen hunter's brow, and, thankfully, his chest rose and fell – albeit with a somewhat ragged motion.

Dean leaned in closer, letting both hands lightly frisk over his brother in search of injuries. "I don't get it," he finally winced. "I can't find one single wound. Not even a bump on that chunk of wood he calls a head..."

Hank hunkered down and then fidgeted with the peak of his cap as he made a cursory examination of his own. After a moment, he let the edge of the Mossberg's barrel tease at Sam's outstretched hand. "You're lookin' but you sure ain't seeing. See that big ol' red welt there?" He nodded as if he was actually talking to himself. "That's what you get when you tick off the local wildlife..."

Dean focused his flashlight on the flesh of his brother's hand. There was a reddened lesion and localized swelling, but it took a moment for the cause to sink in. "Scorpion sting?"

Pruitt nodded. "Yessir, and not the big-assed demonic kind by the looks of things. The local critters aren't deadly, but they can sure as heck put you down a few hours – especially if you're allergic to the suckers."

Dean closed his eyes and took down a breath. It seemed too much of a coincidence for Sam to have been stung by a scorpion given Pazuzu's nature, but if the demon had wanted to kill either of them, he didn't need a familiar in the natural world to do his dirty work for him either.

No, this had to be bad luck – hell no – *bad Winchester* luck, but nothing more, surely?

Running a hand to Sam's neck he let the steady throb of blood there reassure him Hank knew what he was talking about. "Do we need to find a doctor?"

Hank sniffed as if he was actually honing in on some wild animal scent and then shrugged. "Doubt it." He prodded Sam gently with the shotgun barrel again. "Seems like *Sleeping Beauty* is stirring all on his own..."

Dean looked at the mechanic with a sudden urge to swing a punch at him. Sam was hurt and he was taking it way too lightly. *I shouldn't have let Sam leave. Me and my big friggin' mouth...*

Dean turned away from Pruitt, tentatively touching his brother's shoulder as he realized Sam's eyelids were trying to push open. He looked so frail, so innocent – just like the night Dean had carried him from a burning house.

But Sam wasn't innocent – he was *special*.

If there had been any doubt before, the events in Butte County had proved that so far his kid brother's abilities remained relatively untapped.

Abilities that shouldn't just be ignored.

And Dean had doubted them – had doubted Sam – for Mia.

So sorry Sammy...

"Why do you look like you just sat through *Beaches* or something?"

The voice was weak, but playful, and in an instant Dean relaxed and then tensed again when he realized what Sam was suggesting. Quickly rubbing the moisture from his eyes before there were any further suggestions made that he was going soft, he grumbled a "*Shut up, Sammy,*" and then began another appraisal of his brother.

"You're not going to tell me I look like crap?"

"Sammy, you look way worse than crap. You look like a tin of day old dog chow that's been left out way too long in the sun." Dean slid a hand under Sam's shoulder, gently teasing him into a sitting position. "Pretty much smell like it too. Man, you so need a shower..."

Sam blinked, obviously trying to force disorientation away as he swayed a little in his brother's grip. "You'd need a wash too if you'd been in the desert for days..." He took down a long breathe and then let his eyes play around the room. "How did I get here? How...how did I get out of the desert?"

"Maybe you crawled, sonny?" Hank's brow creased. "But whatever you did, you musta done it last night, 'cause you ain't been in the desert for more than a few hours ..."

Sam shook his head, the sweat that had formed there dripping away with the sudden motion. "No...I was in the desert – something must have put me there – a demon maybe? I found a plane. I think it was Gertrude's, the woman you told me about?"

"Son, you're just all fuzzy from the scorpion sting. Maybe the poison is still affecting your judgment." Pruitt raised a brow and shot the elder hunter a concerned glance, but Sam refused to accept the mechanic's logic.

Cradling his still partially numb hand, Sam closed his eyes and began to talk, reciting everything he had seen and heard in such clarity that both his brother and Pruitt found themselves held captive by the unfolding tale.

"I was walking in the desert for what seemed like miles. Hot, scorching heat until the skin was flaking from my lips. And then I saw it – something sticking out of the sand and beckoning to me. It took me a while to get to it and then dig it free, but when I did, it was a Mustang. Gertrude's Mustang..."

"You're sure it was one and the same?" Hank pushed, unable to hold back the excitement in his voice.

Sam bobbed his head. "I saw Gertrude...she called to me, urged me to go to her. That's when I found her bones. Bleached and brittle with age." He let out a breath. "I can only imagine the torment she suffered waiting to be rescued, and eventually waiting to die all those years ago..."

“Sammy, maybe you were just delirious? Ya know, you took in all that crap Preacher Pruitt here fed you last night and it was just your mind playing tricks?” Dean watched his brother’s response, watched every breath the young hunter downed as if he was responsible for what had happened to Sam.

“Dean, I didn’t imagine it. Something happened in the desert, or...or wherever I’ve really been, but it wasn’t in my head. I saw Gertrude, Dean, and I have to know what she was trying to tell me...”

“That you’re a dumb schmuck who oughta know better than to just scoot off every time we argue? I mean, Jeez, Sam, it’s getting kinda regular.” Dean raised a brow and prized Sam’s hand away from his protective posture enough to take a closer look.

Even in the beam of his Maglite the weal looked like it was on fire. “Dude, if you’ve gotta get bitten, can you at least make it by a chick?” The corners of his mouth crept into a mischievous smile, despite both Sam and Pruitt wincing disapprovingly.

“I’m serious, Dean. I need to go back out into the desert. I need to *know*...”

“Yeah, well, *Lawrence of Arabia*, in case you haven’t noticed, you’re in no fit state to go hiking in the sun – and besides, you’re not the only one who had a run in with a sonofabitch that stings.”

“Mia?”

Dean cringed, fighting the urge to snap back some sarcastic and probably uncalled for comment. Sam had had it in his head Mia was bad news before he’d vanished, there was no reason for that to suddenly have changed.

There was also no reason for Sam to be taunting him with the suggestion Mia was involved, but he was. “No,” Dean eventually offered coarsely. “We had a visit from Pazuzu. You know, the freakin’ *Exorcist* creep people tend to think is only in the movies?”

Sam looked up at that, eyes showing surprise and just a touch of concern. “Dean, Pazuzu is *big league*.”

Dean’s nose crinkled in distaste at the recent memories the thing evoked. *Mia almost sacrificed herself to that bastard, he reasoned internally. Now why can’t Sam just see her for what she is?*

“Sam, Mia saved my ass from that thing. She just offered herself up to stop it doing any more damage.” Dean turned away, just like he always did when he knew his little brother wouldn’t see things quite the same way he did.

He could see it in Sam’s eyes.

The mistrust.

Jealously? No, not jealousy.

Not Sammy.

“Dean – why would she do that? Why just give in suddenly to the thing she’s fought for so long? Why here? Why *now*?” Sam pulled his injured hand closer as he continued to question his brother’s judgment.

Without turning back around, Dean growled out two simple words with more ferocity than a grizzly. “For *me*.”

The answer was enough to bring silence between the brothers.

A silence so final, only an outsider could break the icy aura that fell like a blanket on the already darkened room.

“When you two fellas have done bickering like a couple of girls in a panty store, can we please get out of this sweat box?” Hank leaned down, offering up a calloused and somewhat grimy hand to Sam.

Following the elder man’s initiative, Dean put a steadying hand on his brother as Sam clumsily clambered up using the counter for leverage.

“Thanks.” Sam’s eyes locked with Pruitt’s as he teetered. “I don’t know why, but I have a feeling I owe you?”

Hank grinned until his manic expression actually reminded Sam of a clown, minus the greasepaint. Not such a great comparison given the hunter's aversion to the circus performers, but in Hank's case, Sam would forgive him.

"Well," the mechanic drawled. "There is the small matter of you pair of yahoos owing me a new house, but we'll get some ice on that hand before we talk about that."

"House?" Sam mouthed incredulously to Dean as they headed for the doorway and the inviting daylight beyond. "We owe him *a house*?"

Dean switched off his Maglite as they exited the saloon into the morning sun. "Yeah, I'd been meaning to mention that, Sasquatch. Kinda getting to be a regular thing after Bobby's. Pazuzu can level a building faster than a Butte County twister, and this time we didn't have your freaky ass to save us from the suck zone. Hope you always wanted to be a construction worker when you grew up..."

The familiar Winchester smile appeared, but this time there was no real mirth behind the spark of his eyes. Dean might be trying to be funny, but he was stuck between a rock and a hard place; or worse still, between his brother and Mia.

Maybe being stranded in a wasteland like Sam had been wasn't such a bad idea after all.

At least there, there was no choice to make.

No decision between brother and lover that would surely break his heart no matter which path he chose.

Sonoran Desert Two Days Later

The desert seemed different somehow, as if the light flurry of sand blowing over his boot toecaps was his friend rather than the enemy it had been before.

Sam watched the grains whisk over the leather and then vanish back amongst their brethren around his feet. It was a beautiful thing to watch – an act of nature so pure it shouldn't be sullied by man's presence.

And yet, Sam needed to be here.

He needed proof that he truly had seen this place – not in a poison-induced delirium, but in some version of reality even he didn't truly understand.

"I'm telling you, Sammy, there's nothing out here. Just sand, sand and more friggin' sand."

Sam watched the shadow of his brother fall across the adjacent dunes until Dean was at his side, hands stuffed firmly in his jacket pockets despite the heat.

As Sam looked up, Dean squinted, shading his eyes to gaze into the distance.

"Pazuzu hasn't shown his ass for two days. You're finally acting half-sane; tell me again just why you dragged us out into Satan's sandbox?" Dean's brow flicked up and he shook his head when the horizon appeared to be as empty as he'd suspected.

"Because I can't forget what I saw," Sam answered flatly. "I have to know about Gertrude."

"Dude, even if the chick was real, she lured your gangly butt over the edge of a cliff. And you want to meet her again to see if she wants to finish off the job?" The hunter rolled his eyes, shaking his head a little as he turned to see Hank Pruitt finally bringing up the rear.

Pruitt had found the desert terrain a touch much for his overly-plump frame, but so far he hadn't complained once at Sam's desire to trek into the wilds. In fact, the wacky mechanic had seemed to welcome the idea like a kid getting overly-excited at a treasure hunt.

Sam had appreciated Pruitt's enthusiasm, even if the mechanic still thought he'd imagined a whole lot of what he'd seen.

“Gertrude wasn’t trying to hurt me, I know it,” Sam offered, taking long strides forward as the memory of his journey let him slip into some kind of unconscious autopilot. “She was trying to show me something.”

“Aren’t they always?” Dean huffed, following his brother as they pushed onwards up an incline. *Right before they tear you a new one*, he mentally noted.

“Maybe she knew about the demon? Maybe it was all connected somehow?” Sam theorized, pausing to make a quick scan of the landscape now on view from the slope’s summit.

“Yeah, and maybe I’m Mickey Mouse.”

“You’re small enough...”

“Bite me.”

A thin smile crept over Sam’s face and his cheeks suddenly turned into craters. “I thought you didn’t swing that way?” When Dean’s face contorted and his features took on the palor of a man about to puke, Sam couldn’t stifle his laughter any longer. “Seriously, dude, I know this desert like I’ve been here before. Because *I have been here before.*”

To prove the point, Sam carefully jogged down the sand embankment and launched into a careful sprint, ever mindful of the Saguaro cacti at his feet. Halfway to his destination, he whirled to see Dean grudgingly following. In the far distance, Hank Pruitt had finally reached the peak of the dune and was leaning forward, hands on knees as if he was about to have a heart attack.

“C’mon you short-legged slow pokes. We’re nearly there!” Sam shot the two men tailing him a quick wave of his healing hand and then began to pad along again, his target in sight. Over his shoulder, he heard a muffled and very long chorus of expletives that could only be his brother enjoying the exercise and joyous Sonoran heat.

“Friggin’ sand in my boots. Friggin’ sand in my hair...this spook better sing the friggin’ Star Spangled Banner with bells on when we find her or I swear I’m gonna salt and burn one bone at a time...”

“We’re here.” Sam slowed his gait and eventually came to a halt in a seemingly barren stretch of the desert. The sand had formed smaller dunes in this spot – like a beach that changed with the ebb and flow of the tides.

It wasn’t exactly as he’d remembered it, but then he had seen this place in a different time, a different existence.

“Well, this is peachy.” Dean narrowed his eyes as if expectantly awaiting some extreme revelation. “You mind telling me what is so special about this place? Apart from the apparent lack of *anything?*” The hunter hunkered down, sifting a hand through the sand as if he would somehow come up with a palm full of gold. When the sand simply filtered through his fingers, he shook off the excess and straightened back up.

“The plane is here,” Sam explained. “Somewhere under the sand, maybe deep after all these years. But I *sense* it.”

“As in freaky, geekboy sense it?” Dean’s expression darkened. “I mean, have you got the whole ‘*A Jedi’s strength flows from the Force*’ thing goin’ on?”

Sam cringed at the suggestion, and his brother’s constant use of *Star Wars* quotes.

He knew his gift was growing.

Knew that soon he would have to embrace it – whatever that meant. But that wasn’t what was happening here.

It never had been.

“No,” he sighed. “This isn’t about my gifts – at least, not directly. Something touched me somehow. Connected with me on some unconscious level.” He licked his bottom lip, turning away in thought before continuing. “It’s like someone, or something plugged me in to a recording of the past, maybe the fever the sting caused helped, but somehow I lived through a replay of events here.”

“Or Pazuzu seriously screwed around in that messed up head of yours.” Dean suggested, kicking at the sand at his feet restlessly.

“Or Pazuzu seriously screwed with my head,” Sam admitted, smiling again as he and Dean finally agreed on something. Anything since the whole Mia debate. “But I don’t think that’s the answer.”

Dropping to his knees, he began scooping up handfuls of the desert until a small dune began to form behind him and a hole began to appear in front.

When Sam continued to dig as if he was a human earthmover for over ten minutes, Dean finally gave in and began to help.

“Whoa, hold on! I think I found something.” Dean stopped his furious burrowing and gently began to dust away the last remaining sand to reveal a portion of Plexiglas. “Well I’ll be...”

“It’s the cockpit,” Sam breathlessly exclaimed. “If you dig a little further that side you should find the release...”

Dean shrugged, but did as he was told, sliding a hand down until the canopy moved slightly, but didn’t open. He tugged harder, and when Sam began to prize at the metal edges his side, the glass cover finally yielded.

There was a hiss, as stale air escaped the prison it had helped form, and then there was silence, both Winchesters staring inside at something that had been lost in the ether as if H.G. Wells had concealed it with his time machine.

“Well will you look at that!” Hank Pruitt’s voice broke the lull, and as Sam looked up, he saw the mechanic whip off his cap and shake his head in amazement. “Looks like my dear old daddy was right after all!” He rubbed vacantly at the whiskers on his chin. “There’s no body, though...”

“Not here,” Sam corrected, leaning inside to find Gertrude’s journal just where it had been before. He brushed it off, gently flicking through the pages to read the entries he could recite without actually having to look at the words.

“You knew the diary was there, huh?” Dean asked, watching as his brother leafed through the book, his eyes becoming more distant the further he got. “I mean, dude, this is freaky, even for us. How can you know that crap?”

Sam let the cover close on the last will and testament of the pilot and thought about it. Pazuzu being here was a coincidence, but maybe the scorpion sting really was part and parcel of what had happened to him – a catalyst that had allowed a dead woman to be heard.

“I think touching Gertrude’s wings back at Hank’s, coupled with the sting’s effects, somehow gave Gertrude the conduit she needed to reach out to me and show me what happened to her. Maybe my gifts helped too, I don’t know...”

“You think you’ve been speaking to a dead woman?” Hank asked, his uncertain expression making it clear what he thought.

“Not exactly,” Sam offered, his voice low as he theorized more. “I think maybe her soul touched me somehow. She wanted me to know her fate. And maybe, something more.” He slid the book into his jacket, his head turning to face his brother. “Dean, I think she wants to rest.”

“Dude, in case you haven’t noticed, we have no body.”

“Yeah, we do.” Sam silently looked away into the never-ending desert and started to walk again, this time more slowly so that the tortoise-paced Pruitt could keep up.

Neither Dean nor Hank questioned him, but simply followed until Sam reached yet another hill, this one far steeper than its predecessor. Eyeing the rocks he had cut his palms on in his “vision,” Sam began to climb, this time with far more vigor than in his dream.

When he reached the peak, he didn’t look down or wait for his entourage to catch up, but instead began his rapid descent.

As his boots sank into the sand he recalled the feeling of tumbling to his death here. How his body had rolled, his limbs flailing wildly until he’d collapsed on the

boulders beneath. Even now, if he dwelt on the sensation long enough, he could feel the numbing pain and the acceptance that he was going to die.

Just one wrong step, just one loose rock and...

And nothing, because as the thought flashed across his synapses, Sam had already reached the base of the ridge, his boots firmly placed on the rocks below.

And it was here Gertrude waited for him.

Not in her ethereal form, but in her true state.

Sam kneeled slowly, taking in the bleached and in some places marred bones, and in his mind, he relived how they had gotten here through his own experience.

The skeleton's solitary resting place and past history affected the young hunter like no other body ever had. He felt the pain behind the remains.

He felt the connection to a woman he had shared time with, but would never truly meet, and it saddened him.

Gertrude had wanted him to know her story, had wanted him to find her after all this time – she had wanted peace.

And now, perhaps he could finally give it to her.

Rubbing the back of his hand across his mouth, he winced as day-old stubble pricked at the scorpion sting there.

One last little message through the veil from Gertrude, perhaps, saying not to be sad? *Or am I just reading too much into things after all this?*

A *huff* and several gasps signaled Dean's arrival at the base of the rise, and as Sam looked up, he realized his brother was already scowling at the bones as if they were part of a regular hunt.

But this was no hunt - Gertrude wasn't evil.

"I'll shag ass back to Hank's truck and get the salt and lighter fluid..." Dean spun on his heels, about to retrace his steps when Sam stopped him.

"Dean, wait. Gertrude deserves better than that. She deserves to go home with respect."

"Are you nuts? After what she put you through? How do we know she hasn't been pulling this stunt on poor tourist schmucks for years? She could be ganking people all over this desert for kicks and I doubt anyone around here would notice."

"I just *know*, Dean. There was no malice intended. *Trust me...*" Sam examined his brother's expression for changes, knowing that Dean hadn't trusted him over Mia – not one bit – or at least it felt that way.

Why should Dean trust him now?

There was a pause and Dean nodded. "Okay, man, your call. I'll go get a tarp from the truck bed to carry the bones in."

Sam watched as his brother clambered back over the sandbank and vanished into the heat of the desert. For the briefest of moments he felt alone again, like he was lost and never going home.

Then, after a short and very wet sneeze at his side, he remembered Hank was still with him, hovering over the body. As Sam spun around to face him, the grimy mechanic's slightly wild eyes stared off into the abyss that was the Sonora.

"You believe in ghosts, don't you, son?" Hank asked, surprising the hunter with his frankness.

Sam's cheeks dimpled and he smiled back wanly. Pruitt had been through a lot since they'd been staying with him. From Pazuzu tearing down his house, to exorcisms, to whacked out walkabouts inspired by delirium. And still, he'd only seen the tip of the proverbial iceberg. *If only you knew...*

Hank sniffed at Sam's lack of response, apparently taking it for an affirmation that the young man believed in the afterlife. "Hell, sometimes I get to thinking that spooks are like distant voices from the past, ya know? Just to remind us of what's gone. Kinda like an echo..." His gaze remained ahead, unflinching, and he crossed his arms over his chest as if there was a chill from which he suddenly needed to keep himself warm.

Sam considered the mechanic's words, abruptly realizing there was more to the man than he'd ever given credit for. Not all spirits were evil. Not every gig had to have a bad ending for the entity involved. "Maybe sometimes we're just not on the same wavelength," the hunter offered sadly. "At least, not until something like the scorpion sting."

"Yeah, somethin' like that, kid." Pruitt bobbed his head, and, roughly sticking his hand in his pocket, retrieved a wad of tobacco which he chewed on. He offered the remaining segment to Sam, who quickly refused it.

Shrugging, Hank stuffed the wad back in its hiding place and turned to follow Dean back to the truck. Halfway up the slope, he stopped, and Sam expected the overweight mechanic to start sucking down air from losing his breath.

Instead, Pruitt's eyes narrowed and his face grew more serious than Sam thought possible. "That sassy gal your brother hangs with? Watch what the voices tell you about her, sonny..."

Sam opened his mouth, but found he had no reply to give. When he finally decided to ask the older man to explain himself, Pruitt had already whirled back and was hotfooting it up the gradient like a mountain goat.

Either he'd been faking his exhaustion earlier to let the brothers go ahead and talk alone – or he seriously didn't want to discuss what he'd meant about Mia.

Sam wasn't sure which, but he knew the option that disturbed him most.

"That sassy gal your brother hangs with? Watch what the voices tell you about her, sonny..."

Sam was more than watching, he was scrutinizing.

And recently, he just didn't know how to interpret what he was seeing.

Hank's Workshop

Dean rubbed the grease from his hands on a rag that looked grimier than the hunter's appendages. If Hank had ever bothered to use clean cloths out in his workshop, Sam would never have guessed it.

"Dude, I think your hands are likely to get dirtier, not cleaner off that thing," he pointed out.

Dean looked down, only just noticing the rag looked like it had hung in a barrel of oil for a decade or so. He shrugged. "My baby's finished, who cares if I got a little dirty in the process?"

"You're always a *little dirty*," Sam quipped back, enjoying the brief moment of levity he could share with his brother. For once, Dean seemed to be his old self – but that was only because the Impala was once again roadworthy.

Sam had no doubt that if he as much as broached the subject of Mia, then things would get ugly all over again. There was an atmosphere he couldn't put his finger on – like somehow he and Dean had been separated by an invisible wall. They could see one another, talk to one another – but the connection as siblings they'd once shared had been severed.

He glanced over to the doorway that lead to the house, wondering just how close Mia was. She was supposed to be in what was left of Hank's kitchen packing sandwiches, but that didn't mean a thing.

It was funny, but Mia had the furtiveness of a stealth bomber when she wanted it.

How he was going to handle the road trip with her to take back Gertrude's skeleton remained to be seen. Sam had visions – and not the freaky kind – that he'd end up hitch hiking by the side of the road before the girl would be ejected from the car.

Dean wouldn't go that far...

...no, but maybe I would...

This can only go on so long, dammit!

“So, how did the repairs go?” Sam avoided talking about the girl directly, taking a more cautious approach. Mia wasn’t the only one who could be as sly as a prairie dog when the need arose. “Was it definitely just wear and tear?”

Dean tossed the cloth down a fraction too quickly, running fingers through the front of his short-cropped hair despite the lubricant that still clung to them. “I guess so. I mean, Hank did most of the repairs to the gearbox. It was just coincidence it happened now, that’s all.”

Sam’s brow shot up. Dean was still protecting the girl – even when he didn’t realize it.

The realization was just too much for the younger brother and he couldn’t bite back his true thoughts any longer. “So the whole phantom attacker thing in Bennington was a coincidence too? And the fact that a major league demon like Pazuzu showed up, kicked our asses, and then vanished again without so much as a second offensive? That’s all just one big accident?”

“Sam, Mia let herself get possessed to save my ass, how can you stand there and tell me you still don’t trust her?” Anger flashed across Dean’s eyes and he lashed out, kicking an empty oil can until it danced across the workshop in a metallic tango Patrick Swayze would have been proud of.

Sam didn’t bother to answer. When Dean was mad he’d long since learned not to argue back. It only ended in more choice words neither brother really meant.

Mia was coming between them, and Sam was getting more and more convinced love wasn’t her true motive.

But am I really sure?

A part of him couldn’t help but think that deep down he was scared Dean would get a life – a real life – and he’d be left the loner. A not so poetic role reversal he would never have seen coming.

“So what are you two bozos moping around at? I thought Dean’s wheels being all better would have been cause for a party, not a wake?” Mia strolled into the workshop with a wicker basket under one arm. “What’s eating at you two?”

Even at this distance, Sam could see a host of foodstuffs crammed into the basket that would undoubtedly make Dean’s eyes pop when he saw them. *Am I wrong about her?*

“Oh, nothing’s wrong now that you’re here...” Dean slid an arm around the girl as if he was going to pull her close, but at the last minute, he snagged the basket instead, taking an appreciative peek inside as he headed for the Impala’s trunk with it.

Mia huffed, putting her hands on her hips playfully as he stashed the food. “Typical male,” she noted. “Puts his stomach first and the girl second.” She thought about it. “Actually, food first, car second, girl third?”

Dean grinned. “Sounds good to me, sweetheart!”

Sam watched as the pair shot more sarcastic banter back and forth faster than a tennis match, realizing only when he looked away that they were not alone.

Hank Pruitt was standing silently by the main shutter doorway, his beady eyes locked on Dean and Mia as if he was dissecting what was going on at some higher level.

Sam wasn’t sure if the mechanic had been standing there when he’d had words with Dean. Maybe he’d heard the whole dysfunctional conversation.

Leaving Dean to finish packing the car, he strode over to Pruitt, thankful of a reason to avoid watching any more flirting Winchester style.

“All ready to have some peace and quiet back around your house?” Sam nodded towards the still trashed farm with an apologetic look on his boyish features.

Hank shrugged, a thin veil of amusement passing over his face. “You sure know how to throw a party, that’s all I’m gonna say.”

“Thanks,” Sam held out a hand. “Thanks for everything.”

Hank's smile turned into a full-blown laugh. "Thanks to you guys I don't think I'll ever sleep again." He took Sam's offered hand and shook it a little too heartily. "You boys have a safe journey...and Sam?"

Sam's eyebrow ticked up expectantly.

There was something about the way the mechanic had said his name that sent a thin, icy trail along the edge of his spine right on down to the tips of his toes.

"Listen to the voices, Sam..."

The hunter bobbed his head, but before he could say more the Impala's engine grumbled to life, and the car shot forward until it was level with where he was standing.

The driver's window tumbled down and Dean popped his head out, a full-on grin showing his mood had at least lightened since their earlier conversation. "Time to hit the road, little brother." He jerked a thumb to the trunk. "Gertrude ain't getting any younger."

Sam scooted around the glistening hood, noting that Dean must have been up all night polishing the classic to get such a shine on the paintwork. Dropping into the passenger seat, he tugged the heavy door closed behind him and watched the outside landscape change as his brother pulled the Chevy off Hank's driveway.

Thinking of the mechanic again, he found himself looking back over his shoulder, and sure enough, Pruitt was standing watching from the shadows as they exited his farm.

In that instant, he realized the man they had stayed with was far more intelligent than anyone had given him credit for.

"Listen to the voices, Sam..."

Pruitt hadn't meant ghostly voices from the past, after all. No, Pruitt had meant Sam's *inner* voices.

He should trust his own instincts about Mia.

Falling dejectedly back into the front bench seat, Sam exhaled, his throat bobbing awkwardly as he swallowed hard.

Somehow he had to find the truth about Mia without Dean knowing.

If he turned out to be wrong, Dean could be pissy with him for weeks and Sam wouldn't care as long as his brother was safe.

But if Sam was right....

The End

Author's Note: The pilot this story is based on and the facts surrounding her disappearance are all true. To this day, Gertrude Tompkins Silver's fate remains a mystery.